

# From Callouts to Boycotts: Cancel Culture's Influence on Consumer Behavior and Brand Perceptions in the Digital Marketplace

Joshua C. Amen <sup>1\*</sup>, John Paul A. Bagadiiong <sup>1</sup>, Ronn Harvey A. Gayo <sup>1</sup>, Deinielle Irish C. Nava <sup>1</sup>, Nica Rose Silos <sup>1</sup>, Daniela L. Veron Cruz <sup>1</sup>, Marianne Iban <sup>1</sup>, Maria Cristina Meñez <sup>1</sup>, Mary Ann Cruz <sup>1</sup>, Jay-Ar Sistona <sup>1</sup>, Sheilla Marie Apostol <sup>1</sup>, Arsenia U. Gallardo<sup>1</sup>, Ryan Rey Pasagui <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> College of Business and Accountancy, Our Lady of Fatima University

\* [amennnjoshuaaaa@gmail.com](mailto:amennnjoshuaaaa@gmail.com), [john.paul.bagadiiong@gmail.com](mailto:john.paul.bagadiiong@gmail.com), [ronnharvey15@gmail.com](mailto:ronnharvey15@gmail.com), [rishanava08@gmail.com](mailto:rishanava08@gmail.com), [zusumiesilos@gmail.com](mailto:zusumiesilos@gmail.com), [danielaveroncruz7@gmail.com](mailto:danielaveroncruz7@gmail.com)

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined how cancel culture influences consumer behavior and brand perceptions in the digital marketplace, particularly through moral outrage, social identity alignment, and collective action tendency. Using a quantitative descriptive-correlational design, the study surveyed 184 social media users from Generation Z, Millennial, and Generation X groups who were familiar with online brand controversies and digital consumer discussions. Data were collected through a validated four-point Likert-scale questionnaire and analyzed using frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, Pearson product-moment correlation, and multiple regression. Findings showed that consumer perception toward cancel culture was high overall ( $M = 3.03$ ), while consumer behavior and brand perception in the context of cancel culture were likewise high ( $M = 3.33$ ), with brand trust receiving the highest mean ( $M = 3.45$ ). Correlation results revealed significant positive relationships between cancel culture dimensions and purchase intention, brand trust, brand loyalty, and brand advocacy. Social identity alignment showed the strongest associations, particularly with brand loyalty ( $r = .723$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and purchase intention ( $r = .718$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Regression analysis indicated that cancel culture dimensions significantly predicted consumer behavior and brand perceptions, explaining 55.6% of the variance. The study concludes that cancel culture meaningfully shapes digital consumer decision-making, especially when consumers evaluate whether a brand aligns with their values, responds ethically to controversy, and maintains public accountability.

**Keywords:** *cancel culture; consumer behavior; brand perception; social media backlash; purchasing intention; brand trust*

## INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, social media platforms have allowed consumers to publicly call out individuals, public figures, and corporations. This practice has contributed to the rise of cancel culture, a phenomenon in which online criticism may escalate into organized boycotts, reputational pressure, and shifts in consumer support. For businesses, cancel culture creates a challenging environment where trust, accountability, transparency, and crisis response become central to sustaining brand reputation in the digital marketplace.

Cancel culture is not limited to online discourse because social media criticism can translate into consumer decisions such as withdrawing support, avoiding purchases, discouraging others from buying, or joining digital boycotts. Studies on online consumer activism and boycott behavior show that public criticism and digital mobilization can influence brand reputation, consumer trust, and market response (Chen et al., 2021; Gonzales et al., 2022; Goswami & Balasubramanian, 2022; Patel & Nguyen, 2021). Brand controversies also require companies to manage public relations carefully because ineffective responses may worsen backlash and weaken consumer confidence (Park & Kim, 2022; Ramos & Torres, 2025).

Although cancel culture has become increasingly visible, its specific influence on consumer behavior and brand perception across generations remains insufficiently explored. Much of the discussion on cancel culture focuses on social or ethical issues, while fewer studies explain how moral outrage, identity-based value alignment, and collective action tendency shape purchase intention, brand trust, brand loyalty, and brand advocacy. This gap is important because Generation Z, Millennials, and Generation X differ in digital exposure, online activism, and expectations of corporate accountability (International Journal of Youth Studies, 2024; Journal of Cross-Generational Research, 2025; Rivera & Tan, 2024).

This study therefore investigated the influence of cancel culture on consumer behavior and brand perceptions in the digital marketplace. Specifically, it described the profile of respondents, assessed the level of consumer perception toward cancel culture, determined the level of consumer behavior and brand perception in the context of cancel culture, examined the relationships among the key dimensions, and identified marketing and brand management insights that may help companies respond effectively to online backlash and rebuild consumer trust.

## Literature Review

### *Cancel Culture, Moral Outrage, and Online Consumer Activism*

Cancel culture operates through public criticism, moral evaluation, and collective pressure. Moral outrage becomes a strong emotional response when consumers perceive that a brand has violated ethical standards, social norms, or public expectations. This emotional response can motivate consumers to participate in online criticism, support boycott calls, or demand corrective action. Smith and Lee (2023) emphasized the role of moral outrage in online consumer activism, while Roldan (2024) examined cancel culture as a belief-driven response to perceived injustice. In the digital marketplace, moral outrage can therefore transform a brand controversy into a broader consumer movement.

Online activism expands the reach of moral outrage by allowing consumers to join discussions, share criticism, and mobilize coordinated actions. Chen et al. (2021) showed that social media activism influences consumer responses to brand controversies, while Patel and Nguyen (2021) linked consumer activism with corporate accountability in digital environments. These findings support the idea that consumers no longer act only as buyers; they also act as public evaluators of brand ethics and accountability.

### *Social Identity Alignment and Brand Evaluation*

Social identity alignment explains why consumers support brands that reflect their personal beliefs and values. When a brand appears consistent with a consumer's social, cultural, or ethical identity, the consumer is more likely to develop trust, loyalty, and positive purchase intention. Wang (2021) argued that viewpoint incompatibility can trigger consumer boycott behavior, suggesting that value mismatch may lead consumers to withdraw support from a brand. Ramos and Nguyen (2024) similarly emphasized that cancel culture affects brand loyalty among Millennials and Generation Z, who often expect brands to demonstrate authenticity and social responsibility.

Brand trust and brand loyalty are important outcomes of identity alignment. Bernarto et al. (2020) found that brand image, brand trust, and brand loyalty influence purchase intention, while Quayle et al.

(2022) showed that brand trust moderates the effect of consumer boycotts and firm reputation. These findings suggest that even when a brand faces criticism, trust and value alignment may influence whether consumers continue supporting or abandon the brand.

***Collective Action, Boycotts, and Brand Perception***

Collective action tendency refers to consumers’ willingness to participate in coordinated actions such as online campaigns, public criticism, or boycotts. Digital boycotts make consumer dissatisfaction visible and may pressure brands to respond. Gonzales et al. (2022) discussed digital boycotts and consumer reactions to corporate controversies, while Goswami and Balasubramanian (2022) connected consumer boycott behavior with brand reputation in social media environments. Lopez and Chen (2023) also observed that online outrage can affect brand perception by shaping the information consumers receive and the meanings they attach to brand behavior.

Generational differences further shape collective action. Younger consumers are generally more exposed to digital activism and may be more likely to engage in online discussions and value-based consumption (International Journal of Youth Studies, 2024; Rivera & Tan, 2024). Cross-generational research also suggests that digital activism and consumer behavior vary by age group, which makes generational analysis relevant in studying cancel culture (Journal of Cross-Generational Research, 2025).

**Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

The study was anchored on Social Identity Theory, Moral Outrage Theory, and Collective Action perspectives. Social Identity Theory explains how consumers evaluate brands based on whether these brands align with their group values and personal beliefs. Moral Outrage Theory explains why perceived ethical violations generate strong emotional reactions that lead to criticism or withdrawal of support. Collective Action perspectives explain how individual reactions can become organized online responses, such as callouts and boycotts. Together, these perspectives explain how generational identity and digital exposure may lead to moral and identity-based appraisal, symbolic sanctions, economic sanctions, and changes in consumer behavior and brand perceptions.

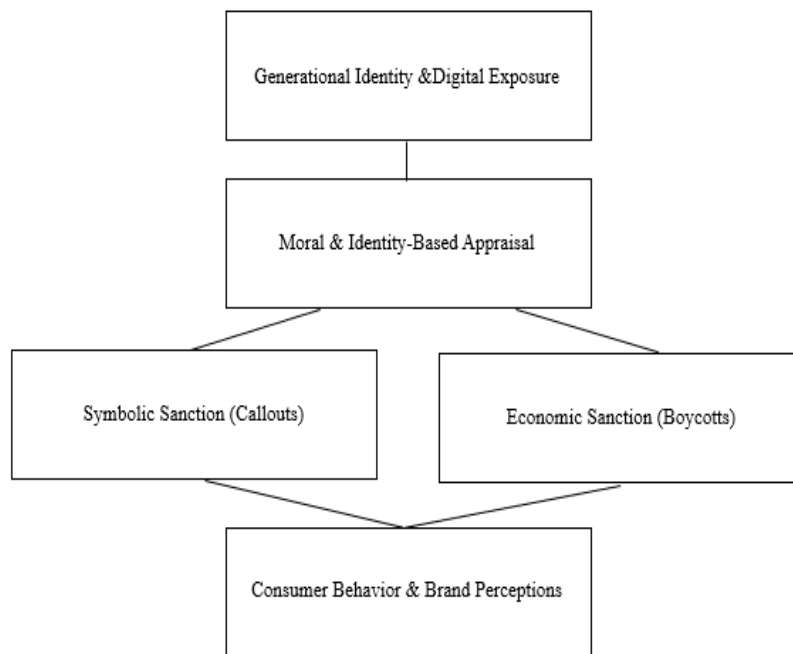


Figure 1. *Conceptual framework of the study*

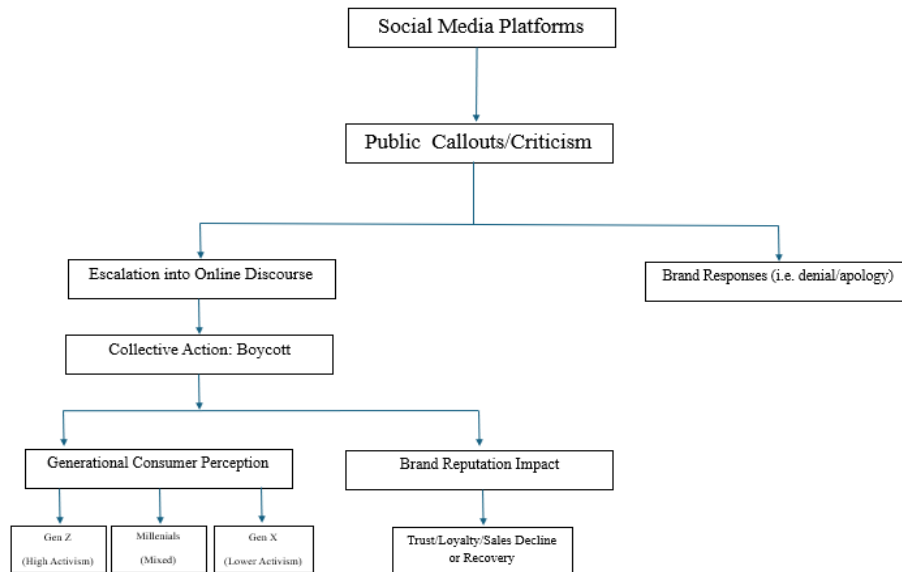


Figure 2. *Research simulacrum of cancel culture progression*

## METHODS

### Research Design

The study employed a quantitative descriptive-correlational research design. The descriptive component summarized respondent characteristics and assessed the levels of cancel culture perception, consumer behavior, and brand perception. The correlational component examined the relationships between cancel culture dimensions and consumer behavior outcomes, while regression analysis determined the predictive influence of moral outrage, social identity alignment, and collective action tendency on purchase intention, brand trust, brand loyalty, and brand advocacy.

### Research Locale

The study was conducted in a digital research setting involving social media users in the Philippine online marketplace. Since cancel culture is primarily formed and amplified through online platforms, survey administration through digital channels was appropriate for capturing consumer attitudes shaped by social media exposure, online activism, and brand-related public discourse.

### Participants and Sampling Technique

The respondents were 184 social media users from different generational groups, particularly Generation Z, Millennials, and Generation X. Participants were selected through non-probability convenience sampling and purposive sampling. They were required to be at least 19 years old, active social media users, and familiar with online discussions involving brands or social issues. Although the sampling method limited broad generalizability, it allowed the researchers to gather responses from individuals directly exposed to cancel culture in digital spaces.

### Research Instrument

A structured survey questionnaire served as the main instrument. The first section gathered demographic information, including age, gender, generation, frequency of social media use, and level of

online activism. The second section measured cancel culture dimensions, namely moral outrage, social identity alignment, and collective action tendency. It also measured consumer behavior and brand perception variables, namely purchase intention, brand trust, brand loyalty, and brand advocacy. Responses were measured using a four-point Likert scale. The instrument was reviewed by a marketing expert and a business research expert for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study objectives.

### Data Gathering Procedure

Data were collected through an online survey. The questionnaire was converted into a digital form and distributed through social media platforms and online communication channels. Respondents read the informed consent statement before answering. After data collection, responses were screened for completeness and validity, and the finalized dataset was encoded for statistical analysis.

### Data Analysis

Frequency and percentage distribution were used to describe respondent profiles. Mean and standard deviation were used to determine the levels of cancel culture perception and consumer behavior variables. Pearson product-moment correlation was used to examine relationships between cancel culture dimensions and consumer behavior outcomes. Multiple regression analysis was used to identify significant predictors. All hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance.

### Ethical Consideration

Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study before answering the questionnaire. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by excluding personally identifiable information. Responses were used only for academic and research purposes, and data were handled securely by the researchers. The questionnaire avoided harmful or overly sensitive questions to minimize risk to respondents.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Respondents' Demographic and Digital Profile

The respondents were mostly young adults and highly active social media users. The most represented age was 22 years old (20.65%), followed by 21 years old (13.59%) and 23 years old (11.41%). Most respondents were female (60.87%), and the majority belonged to Generation Z (77.47%), followed by Millennials (20.33%) and Generation X (2.20%). In terms of social media use, most respondents reported frequent (45.65%) or very frequent (35.87%) use, confirming that the sample was highly exposed to the digital environments where cancel culture discussions commonly occur. Most respondents also reported a moderate level of online activism (54.35%).

Table 1. *Profile of the Respondents*

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	22 years old	38	20.65%
Age	21 years old	25	13.59%
Age	23 years old	21	11.41%
Age	19 years old	18	9.78%
Age	20 years old	10	5.43%
Gender	Female	112	60.87
Gender	Male	68	36.96
Gender	Prefer not to say	4	2.17
Generation	Gen Z (1997–2012)	143	77.47
Generation	Millennial (1981–1996)	37	20.33
Generation	Gen X (1965–1980)	4	2.2
Social media use	Frequently	84	45.65

Social media use	Very Frequently	66	35.87
Social media use	Occasionally	21	11.41
Social media use	Rarely	13	7.07
Online activism	Moderate	100	54.35
Online activism	High	48	26.09
Online activism	Low	36	19.57

### Level of Consumer Perception Toward Cancel Culture

The overall level of consumer perception toward cancel culture was high ( $M = 3.03$ ). Social identity alignment obtained the highest mean ( $M = 3.19$ ), indicating that respondents strongly considered whether a brand reflected their values and beliefs. Moral outrage was also high ( $M = 3.06$ ), suggesting that respondents experienced strong emotional responses when brands were involved in ethically or socially problematic issues. Collective action tendency was moderate ( $M = 2.85$ ), implying that respondents recognized the value of coordinated online actions, but not all were equally willing to participate in boycotts or organized campaigns.

Table 2. *Level of Consumer Perception Toward Cancel Culture*

Dimension	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Moral Outrage	3.06	0.7	High
Social Identity Alignment	3.19	0.66	High
Collective Action Tendency	2.85	0.7	Moderate
Overall Mean	3.03	—	High

### Level of Consumer Behavior and Brand Perception

The overall level of consumer behavior and brand perception in the context of cancel culture was high ( $M = 3.33$ ). Brand trust obtained the highest mean ( $M = 3.45$ ), showing that trust was a central factor in how respondents evaluated brands during controversies. Purchase intention was also high ( $M = 3.37$ ), indicating that controversies may affect consumers' willingness to buy from a brand. Brand loyalty ( $M = 3.29$ ) and brand advocacy ( $M = 3.23$ ) were likewise high, suggesting that consumers may continue to support, recommend, or defend brands that align with their values and respond responsibly to criticism. These findings support literature emphasizing that brand trust and loyalty are critical to purchase behavior and reputation protection (Bernarto et al., 2020; Quaye et al., 2022).

Table 3. *Level of Consumer Behavior and Brand Perception in the Context of Cancel Culture*

Dimension	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Purchase Intention	3.37	0.63	High
Brand Trust	3.45	0.67	High
Brand Loyalty	3.29	0.6	High
Brand Advocacy	3.23	0.68	High
Overall Mean	3.33	—	High

### Relationship Between Cancel Culture Dimensions and Consumer Behavior

Pearson correlation results showed significant positive relationships between cancel culture dimensions and all consumer behavior and brand perception variables. Social identity alignment showed the strongest relationships, particularly with brand loyalty ( $r = .723, p < .001$ ) and purchase intention ( $r = .718, p < .001$ ). These results indicate that when consumers perceive that a brand aligns with their identity and values, they are more likely to maintain purchase intention and loyalty even in the context of digital controversy. Moral outrage and collective action tendency also showed moderate to strong positive relationships with purchase intention, brand trust, loyalty, and advocacy. The findings affirm that cancel culture is closely tied to emotional evaluation, value alignment, and collective digital behavior.

Table 4. *Pearson Correlation Between Cancel Culture Dimensions and Consumer Behavior and Brand Perceptions*

Dependent Variable	Moral Outrage (r)	Social Identity Alignment (r)	Collective Action Tendency (r)	Interpretation
Purchase Intention	.588***	.718***	.618***	Strong positive relationship
Brand Trust	.597***	.664***	.523***	Moderate to strong positive relationship
Brand Loyalty	.613***	.723***	.561***	Strong positive relationship
Brand Advocacy	.536***	.691***	.583***	Strong positive relationship

\*\*\*p < .001

### Regression Analysis of Cancel Culture Dimensions

Multiple regression analysis confirmed that cancel culture dimensions significantly influenced consumer behavior and brand perceptions. The overall model showed a strong predictive relationship ( $R = .746$ ,  $R^2 = .556$ ), indicating that moral outrage, social identity alignment, and collective action tendency explained 55.6% of the variance in consumer behavior and brand perceptions,  $F(3,180) = 75.094$ ,  $p < .001$ . Among the predictors, social identity alignment consistently emerged as the strongest predictor across purchase intention, brand trust, brand loyalty, and brand advocacy. This result reinforces the importance of value congruence in consumer decision-making during brand controversies (Ramos & Nguyen, 2024; Rivera & Tan, 2024; Wang, 2021).

Table 5. *Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Purchase Intention*

Predictor	B	SE B	$\beta$	t	p	Decision
Moral Outrage	0.143	0.062	0.158	2.314	0.022	Significant – Reject $H_0$
Social Identity Alignment	0.452	0.077	0.47	5.899	< .001	Significant – Reject $H_0$
Collective Action Tendency	0.184	0.063	0.203	2.895	0.004	Significant – Reject $H_0$

Table 6. *Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Brand Trust*

Predictor	B	SE B	$\beta$	t	p	Decision
Moral Outrage	0.252	0.071	0.261	3.549	< .001	Significant – Reject $H_0$
Social Identity Alignment	0.443	0.088	0.433	5.04	< .001	Significant – Reject $H_0$
Collective Action Tendency	0.074	0.073	0.077	1.019	0.31	Not Significant – Fail to Reject $H_0$

Table 7. *Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Brand Loyalty*

Predictor	B	SE B	$\beta$	t	p	Decision
Moral Outrage	0.187	0.059	0.217	3.165	0.002	Significant – Reject $H_0$
Social Identity Alignment	0.48	0.073	0.524	6.573	< .001	Significant – Reject $H_0$
Collective Action Tendency	0.065	0.06	0.075	1.07	0.286	Not Significant – Fail to Reject $H_0$

Table 8. *Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Brand Advocacy*

Predictor	B	SE B	$\beta$	t	p	Decision
Moral Outrage	0.095	0.07	0.098	1.36	0.175	Not Significant – Fail to Reject $H_0$

Social Identity Alignment	0.512	0.086	0.498	5.918	< .001	Significant – Reject H <sub>0</sub>
Collective Action Tendency	0.175	0.072	0.181	2.439	0.016	Significant – Reject H <sub>0</sub>

For purchase intention, all three predictors were significant, with social identity alignment having the strongest standardized effect ( $\beta = .470, p < .001$ ). For brand trust, moral outrage and social identity alignment were significant, while collective action tendency was not. For brand loyalty, moral outrage and social identity alignment were significant, while collective action tendency was not. For brand advocacy, social identity alignment and collective action tendency were significant, while moral outrage was not. These patterns indicate that moral outrage may initiate concern, but identity alignment is more consistently associated with sustained trust, loyalty, and advocacy.

### Marketing and Brand Management Insights

The findings suggest that brands operating in the digital marketplace must treat cancel culture as a serious consumer behavior issue rather than a temporary social media trend. Since brand trust obtained the highest mean and social identity alignment emerged as the strongest predictor, companies should prioritize transparency, accountability, value consistency, and ethical communication. Brands that ignore consumer concerns may experience reputational decline, while brands that acknowledge mistakes and demonstrate corrective action may recover consumer trust (Garcia & Patel, 2025; Park & Kim, 2022; Ramos & Torres, 2025).

### CONCLUSION

The study concluded that cancel culture significantly influences consumer behavior and brand perceptions in the digital marketplace. Respondents demonstrated a high level of perception toward cancel culture, especially in terms of social identity alignment and moral outrage. This indicates that consumers do not evaluate brand controversies only as isolated incidents; rather, they interpret them through personal values, ethical expectations, and the social meanings attached to brand behavior.

Consumer behavior and brand perception were also high, with brand trust emerging as the strongest factor. This finding shows that trust remains essential when brands face online criticism, public callouts, or boycott pressures. Consumers are more likely to maintain positive relationships with brands that communicate honestly, respond responsibly, and align with their values.

The correlation and regression results confirmed that cancel culture dimensions are significantly related to and predictive of consumer behavior and brand perceptions. Social identity alignment was the most influential dimension, particularly for purchase intention and brand loyalty. Overall, the study demonstrates that cancel culture can move from symbolic online criticism to concrete consumer actions, affecting purchase decisions, trust, loyalty, and advocacy.

### Recommendation

1. Businesses and brand managers should prioritize transparency, accountability, and ethical practices in all brand communications and operations. When controversies occur, brands should respond promptly, acknowledge concerns, and communicate corrective actions clearly.
2. Companies should regularly monitor consumer sentiment on social media to identify emerging concerns before they escalate into larger backlash or boycott movements.
3. Marketing professionals should design culturally sensitive, inclusive, and socially responsible campaigns that align with the values of their target audiences, especially younger and highly active digital consumers.

4. Brands should strengthen social responsibility initiatives such as sustainability, diversity, fair labor practices, and community engagement to build stronger emotional and value-based connections with consumers.
5. Consumers and social media users should practice responsible online participation by verifying information, checking source credibility, and engaging in constructive dialogue before criticizing or boycotting brands.
6. Educational institutions and consumer advocacy groups may promote digital literacy and ethical online activism to help consumers participate responsibly in digital marketplace discussions.
7. Future researchers should expand the study to larger and more diverse populations across geographic areas and industries to test whether the findings remain consistent in other consumer contexts.
8. Future studies may also examine additional variables such as cultural background, media exposure, brand type, apology quality, influencer involvement, and long-term reputation recovery.

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