

The Digital Outrage and Distrust: Cancel Culture Against Indonesia's State-Owned Enterprise

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ABSTRACT

Cancel culture is commonly associated with public figures. However, in the era of digital hyperconnectivity, this practice has increasingly targeted state institutions. This study examines how Indonesian netizens construct and mobilize cancel culture in response to a high-profile corruption scandal involving executives of the state-owned oil and gas company, Pertamina. This research is critical for understanding the intersection between crisis communication, public agenda-setting, and digital social control within the context of state-owned enterprises. The study employs a virtual ethnography approach, with data collected through a social listening tool, Brand24, from Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) between February 1st and March 11th, 2025. Findings reveal that the public orchestrated collective pressure using popular words and digital symbols, including emojis and politically charged hashtags. The crisis was widely interpreted as indicative of systemic failure and elite interference. In this case, cancel culture emerged as a form of civic articulation against the lack of transparency, delayed institutional communication, and the erosion of public trust in the state.

Keywords: Cancel Culture; Crisis Communication; Pertamina; Virtual Ethnography

ABSTRAK

Cancel culture umumnya dikaitkan dengan figur publik. Namun, dalam era keterhubungan digital yang semakin intensif, praktik ini juga semakin sering diarahkan kepada institusi negara. Studi ini mengkaji bagaimana netizen Indonesia membentuk dan memobilisasi cancel culture sebagai respons terhadap skandal korupsi berskala besar yang melibatkan jajaran eksekutif perusahaan minyak dan gas milik negara, Pertamina. Penelitian ini penting untuk memahami keterkaitan antara komunikasi krisis, pengaturan agenda publik, dan kontrol sosial digital dalam konteks badan usaha milik negara (BUMN). Pendekatan yang digunakan adalah etnografi virtual, dengan data diperoleh melalui alat *social listening* Brand24 dari platform media sosial Instagram dan X (sebelumnya Twitter) selama periode 1 Februari hingga 11 Maret 2025. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa publik membangun tekanan kolektif melalui kata-kata populer dan simbol digital, termasuk emoji dan tagar bermuatan politik. Krisis ini secara luas dimaknai sebagai kegagalan sistemik dan adanya campur tangan elit. Dalam konteks ini, *cancel culture* muncul sebagai bentuk artikulasi kewargaan terhadap kurangnya transparansi, keterlambatan komunikasi institusional, dan runtuhnya kepercayaan publik terhadap negara.

Kata Kunci: *Cancel Culture*; Komunikasi Krisis; Pertamina; Etnografi Virtual

INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2024, numerous Indonesian motor vehicle users took to social media to report engine damage allegedly caused by fuel from the state-owned oil company Pertamina (Yanuar, 2024). These complaints quickly went viral across platforms, particularly X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and

Instagram. Netizens suspected that the quality of Pertamina's fuel did not meet the advertised specifications. The allegations gained national traction as reports of engine damage emerged simultaneously, especially in the Java and Sumatra regions. Several videos circulated showing vehicles breaking down shortly after refueling. Many users speculated that Pertamina's fuel had a low Research Octane Number (RON) despite being sold at a premium price and marketed as high-RON fuel.

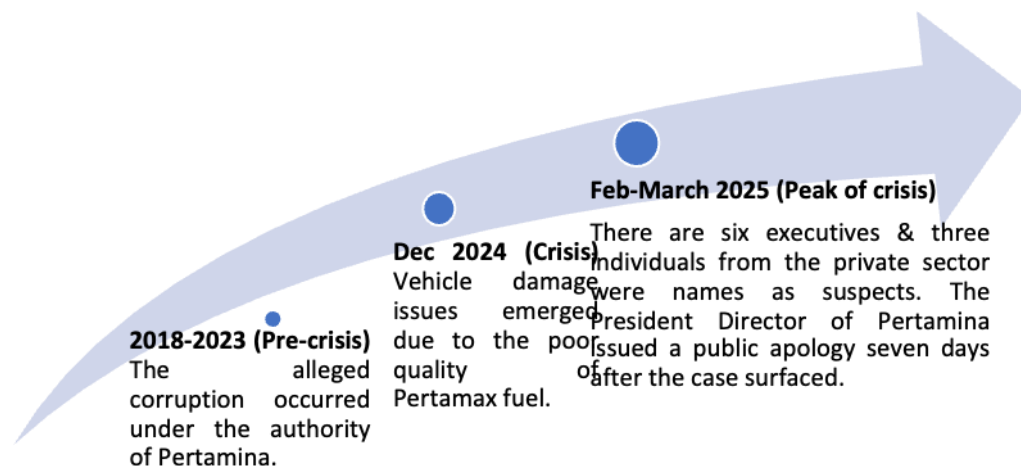


Figure 1. Pertamina Crisis Timeline

Source: Researchers' Media Mapping

In early 2025, public outrage intensified following revelations of a high-level corruption scandal at Pertamina, involving alleged fuel procurement mark-ups that potentially explained the poor fuel quality. This convergence of a consumer product crisis and a corruption scandal triggered a surge of negative online discourse, with hashtags referencing “korupsi” (corruption) and calls to “boikot” (boycott) Pertamina trending widely on social media. In this crisis context, social media became an arena for public expression, criticism, and the mobilization of collective disappointment (Veritasia & Suteja, 2024) directed at a powerful state-owned enterprise integral to daily life.

The Pertamina case not only reflects a crisis of public trust in a government-linked company, but also illustrates how Indonesia's digital society responds through the mechanism of *cancel culture*. Cancel culture is commonly defined as a form of collective boycott or withdrawal of support from a public figure who is perceived to have committed acts deemed taboo or inconsistent with shared values (Jaafar & Herna, 2024).

In this study, however, cancel culture is not limited to individual figures (Effendi & Febriana, 2023) but is also directed toward large institutions that hold both economic and political power. In this sense, an online community “cancels” a figure or entity by publicly calling them out and urging others to shun them as a means of enforcing social norms. Scholars note that cancel culture is rooted in moral norms and social identity dynamics: when an individual or entity violates communal values, the public leverages social sanctions and social media outrage to hold them accountable.

While cancel culture initially gained prominence in cases involving celebrities or public figures, it is increasingly directed toward large institutions with significant economic and political influence. Pertamina, as Indonesia's oldest state-owned energy company, has suffered a significant loss of public credibility (Abdurrahman, n.d., 2025). In response, netizens constructed a collective narrative via social media, questioning Pertamina's legitimacy, calling for consumers to switch to alternative providers, and employing sarcastic emojis as visual symbols of protest.

In the Pertamina crisis, netizens effectively attempted to “cancel” the company, spreading narratives questioning its credibility, urging fellow consumers to seek alternative fuel providers, and using memes and sarcastic emojis as visual protests to express disapproval. This behavior aligns with the view that cancel culture operates as a symbolic strategy for voicing public outrage and demanding accountability from dominant actors. It is not merely a spontaneous outburst of anger or a one-off boycott; rather, it constitutes a coordinated, value-driven movement by the digital public to challenge an institution's legitimacy.

From a communication theory perspective, this phenomenon marks a shift from top-down to bottom-up public agenda formation. While classic agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972)

posits that mass media shape what the public thinks about, the Pertamina case illustrates a reverse process. Netizens took the initiative to frame the crisis themselves—known as reverse agenda-setting—compelling mainstream media and institutions to respond. This aligns with agenda-building theory, which sees agenda formation as the result of interactions among various actors, including active publics (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). This Pertamina case also represents a shift in the relational pattern between institutions and the public (Hjarvard, 2018). The public, embodied by netizens, no longer functions merely as passive recipients of information. Rather, they actively shape, disseminate, and reinforce public opinion (Jaffe, 2011).

Despite the growing prevalence of cancel culture in global discourse, few studies explore its application to public institutions, especially in non-Western contexts. Most prior research focuses on celebrities, entertainment, or social movements (Deshpande et al., 2024; Farries et al., 2024). This study fills that gap by examining how Indonesian netizens mobilized cancel culture on social media against Pertamina during the corruption and product quality crisis.

In a crisis context, social media plays a crucial role in influencing the direction of public discourse and constructing collective perception (Nuortimo et al., 2024). Effective crisis communication demands a swift response. Institutions facing emergencies are expected to demonstrate transparency and assert narrative control (Benoit, 2021). Yet, in Pertamina's case, the company was criticized for its delayed official response. Pertamina's statement was only issued well after the issue had gone viral, allowing the public to independently construct their own interpretations and emotional responses to the crisis.

When a crisis is not promptly addressed by the relevant institution, public reaction may evolve into proactive agenda-setting. According to agenda-building theory, the public and social media play a vital role in generating and distributing issues and compelling responses from mainstream media and formal institutions (Carroll, 2016). This highlights a paradigm shift in how public agendas are formed—from traditional top-down communication to bottom-up mobilization (Rachmawati, 2022). Cancel culture is one such example of bottom-up public agenda setting. It also functions as a symbolic strategy for expressing public dissatisfaction, disappointment, and demands for accountability from powerful actors.

Public responses to Pertamina demonstrate that cancel culture in Indonesia has evolved beyond superficial forms such as boycotting celebrities or unfollowing public figures. In this context, cancel culture is a form of digital collective resistance driven by moral and social narratives. It does not merely consist of expressions of anger; it also articulates the power imbalance between citizens as service users and institutions as holders of economic authority. Netizens express their dissatisfaction through sarcastic remarks, dark humor, memes, and emojis, which function rhetorically to reinforce public opinion and foster solidarity.

Institutional crises—whether in organizations, corporations, or public agencies—affect not only reputation but also the social legitimacy constructed through communication. In the context of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) such as Pertamina, crises are not merely administrative errors; they are closely tied to public perceptions of the state's responsibility for citizens' basic needs. Crisis communication theory asserts that institutional success in managing a crisis depends on the ability to respond promptly, transparently, and accurately (Coombs, 2007).

However, in today's hyper-connected digital environment, conventional approaches to crisis communication often fall short. Rather than waiting for official clarification, netizens tend to build their own narratives via social media. They no longer function as passive recipients of institutional messages but emerge as active agents who produce, distribute, and reinterpret fragments of information. This shift calls for a contextual reexamination of crisis communication theory, as digital public spheres create a new landscape where crises unfold horizontally, virally, and emotionally. In the Pertamina case, delays in institutional response allowed netizens to fill the narrative void with speculation, sarcasm, and protest—expressed through words, emojis, and memes.

Netizen interactions on social media reflect the logic of agenda-building, where the public independently develops issues in digital spaces (Ardi & Putri, 2020). While the original agenda-setting theory positioned mass media as the primary driver of public attention (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), agenda building reconceptualizes the process as a result of interaction among multiple actors, particularly online publics (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). In contemporary Indonesia, social media has become a dominant medium through which the public disseminates information and shapes the rhythm of collective discourse. This bottom-up dynamic, driven by algorithmic connections and shared emotional responses, reflects a reconfiguration of power in public communication (Humphreys, 2007).

Algorithmic connections in digital spaces accelerate the formation of moral consensus, which can quickly transform into collective action. In this context, cancel culture does not arise as a spontaneous reaction, but rather as a symbolic expression of an agenda formed through shared experience (Cook et al., 2021). Blitvich (2024), in her discursive-pragmatic study, argues that cancel culture is part of intergroup communication grounded in moral norms and social identities. When an individual or institution is perceived to violate shared values, the public withdraws support and enacts symbolic exclusion.

Cancel culture is amplified by social media features such as trending topics, hashtags, and visual interactions via emojis. Research on boycotts against Rachel Vennya (Kevin, 2023), Arawinda (Putri et al., 2024), and overclaiming skincare brands (Djamzuri & Mulyana, 2024) demonstrates that Indonesian netizens routinely use social media as a platform for moral expression and public opinion mobilization.

While cancel culture was previously studied mostly in the context of celebrities or public figures, it has now extended to groups and institutions. In a study of pop music fandom, Sandi & Triastuti (2020) showed how fan communities could collectively reward or sanction artists through social media. What was once a one-way relationship between fans and celebrities has evolved into a space of symbolic negotiation. As a result, public support becomes a condition for the sustainability of a figure's career or a group's reputation.

The adverse effects of cancel culture on public figures can be seen in the case of Lesti Kejora and Rizky Billar. In Lesti's case, cancel culture served as a form of digital social control in response to morally unacceptable behavior (Effendi & Febriana, 2023). Similarly, Djamzuri & Mulyana (2024) observed how cancel culture in the beauty industry emerged from netizen responses to brand dishonesty, evolving into digital campaigns through hashtags, meme parties, and satirical content. A similar pattern was observed in the case of Arawinda, where collective pressure led her agency to issue a public clarification (Putri et al., 2024).

The Pertamina case illustrates a more complex form of cancel culture, as it targets a state-owned institution rather than an individual. The scale and symbolic intensity of public reaction were more massive, forceful, and multifaceted. Given that Pertamina is part of the state structure and directly tied to public needs, the cancel culture directed at it is inextricably linked to political and economic dimensions (Diether et al., 2024). Within the framework of agenda-building theory, digital pressure on Pertamina reflects a shifting landscape of power in public communication. Netizens are not merely critics but have become opinion leaders who collectively compel mainstream media and state institutions to respond.

It is important to note that international scholarship views cancel culture as an ambivalent phenomenon. On one hand, it functions as a form of social control that promotes accountability. On the other hand, it carries the risk of unfair exclusion. Prakoso's (2023) study on Twitter shows that cancel culture may evolve into a mob mentality if not accompanied by verification and collective reflection. He emphasizes the role of emojis, memes, and informal language in shaping emotional solidarity among netizens.

Therefore, understanding cancel culture in the context of crisis communication and agenda building requires more than traditional theoretical frameworks. An interdisciplinary approach that combines communication studies, digital culture, and moral sociology is needed to understand how the public constructs narratives and voices dissatisfaction (Clark, 2020). In the Pertamina case, cancel culture reveals that the digital public no longer waits for official explanations to form an opinion. Instead, netizens have developed their own mechanisms for evaluating, judging, and even "punishing" institutions.

The relationship between crisis communication, agenda building, and cancel culture is not linear. Instead, it is dialogic and theoretically entangled (Bouvier, 2020a). These three concepts intertwine to form a new landscape of public communication in the digital age, where crisis is no longer solely about reputation, but about the legitimacy contested and reconstructed within a symbolic field created by the public itself.

This study is significant in that it addresses a gap in the literature on cancel culture targeting major state-owned enterprises. While existing research tends to focus on cancel culture in the context of popular culture, celebrity scandals (Farries et al., 2024), or social justice issues (Deshpande et al., 2024), few studies have explored its application to public institutions. Yet, institutional cancel culture may present distinct dynamics regarding motivation, scale, and impact on institutional legitimacy. In the

context of digital democracy, cancel culture can be interpreted as a form of civic political articulation (Mia, 2021), rooted in frustration and the lack of formal dialogue between the public and the state.

This study is exploratory, researching how Indonesian netizens mobilize cancel culture as a form of digital resistance against Pertamina. By answering this, the researchers aim to understand the symbolic, emotional, and communicative practices underlying public backlash against institutions in times of crisis. The novelty of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining crisis communication, agenda-building theory, and digital cultural studies to analyze cancel culture practices directed at a state-owned enterprise. Previous studies have predominantly applied cancel culture to celebrities, politicians, or individual public figures (Bangun & Kumaralalita, 2022; Driessen, 2023; Farries et al., 2024). This research uses virtual ethnography to explore the symbolic meanings embedded in the language, emojis, and narratives circulated by netizens on social media. This study argues that the Pertamina case illustrates a transformation in digital literacy, social awareness, and the collective capacity of Indonesian netizens to shape public opinion and demand institutional accountability.

This study not only presents a case-specific analysis but also offers a comprehensive reflection on the evolving relationships among the state, media, and digital society during moments of crisis. It further examines how social media functions as a space for meaning-making and collective mobilization (Bouvier, 2020b) and brings attention to the political dimension of cancel culture, where the public is not merely reacting to crisis but constructing alternative narratives that challenge dominant discourse (Diether et al., 2024).

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach using virtual ethnography as its primary method. The purpose of employing virtual ethnography is to explore in depth how netizens interpret and express cancel culture directed at Pertamina. More specifically, the study focuses on the context of the crisis, which involves allegations of corruption and fuel quality issues related to Pertamina.

Virtual ethnography was chosen for its ability to capture the cultural and symbolic dynamics of digital interaction, including textual, emotional, political, and collective dimensions. Within the fluid and fast-paced environment of social media, cancel culture cannot be fully understood through statistical trends or quantitative data alone (Alwasilah, 2000). Instead, its forms and practices must be interpreted as manifestations of digital culture embedded in networks of meaning, identity, and social affiliation (Bryman, 2012).

Derived from classical ethnography, virtual ethnography has evolved in tandem with the emergence of online social spaces (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Hine (2000) describes it as a method that enables researchers to “live in the virtual world,” allowing them to understand social realities constructed through online interactions (Pink et al., 2016). This method involves analyzing message content, observing context, and identifying patterns and social practices that shape meaning within digital communities. The E3 model—embedded, embodied, and everyday—further emphasizes that the internet is no longer a separate realm but integrated into daily life (Hine, 2015).

In the Indonesian context, the use of virtual ethnography has expanded as a method for investigating digital social phenomena. Achmad and Ida (2018) argue that researchers must go beyond passive observation and ethically engage with online communities. This principle is exemplified in the work of Krisvianti and Triastuti (2020), who studied anti-perpetrator Facebook groups by immersing themselves in the online dynamics of a women’s support community composed of domestic violence survivors. Through long-term observation and symbolic analysis, they showed that digital spaces can serve as arenas of resistance and solidarity.

Building on these principles, this study conducted intensive observation and documentation of posts, comments, emojis, memes, and public narratives. The research focused on two major platforms—Twitter (now X) and Instagram—along with online news coverage from December 2024 to March 2025. Data were collected using the social listening tool Brand24. According to We Are Social (2024), Instagram ranks as the third most-used platform in Indonesia, while X is among the top five and is widely used for socio-political discourse. These platforms complement each other: Instagram is visual and emotion-driven, while X functions as a real-time forum for political expression. Together, they provide a representative space for observing digital mobilization.

The research proceeded through three main stages: data collection, documentation, and analysis. During a six-week period that coincided with the peak of the Pertamina crisis, the researchers used

Brand24 to track relevant keywords and hashtags. Real-time discussions, trending topics, and user interactions were monitored to capture the dynamics of the movement. All data were drawn from publicly available sources in accordance with platform policies and research ethics. In the documentation phase, social media posts, metadata, and visual elements—such as viral memes and emoji usage—were archived for contextual interpretation. Field notes were also kept to record shifts in tone, emerging narratives, and digital behaviors associated with cancel culture. For the analysis, an inductive thematic approach was employed. The researchers coded recurring themes and symbols, such as expressions of anger over institutional opacity, sarcastic protest, and calls for boycotts. Particular attention was given to how emojis, hashtags, and repeated phrases reflected shared moral values and collective identity. These patterns developed a grounded narrative explaining how Indonesian netizens mobilized cancel culture against Pertamina.

This method is particularly suited to the study of cancel culture, which functions not merely as individual critique but as a social phenomenon embedded in networked digital communities (Velasco, 2020). While the methodology enabled a deep exploration of online practices, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study excluded TikTok, despite its role in initially amplifying the Pertamina issue. This was due to technical limitations—Brand24 does not support TikTok, and its video-based content posed challenges for systematic data collection. While Instagram and X offered accessible, text-based data and captured the essence of hashtag activism, the exclusion of TikTok may have omitted forms of engagement such as duet videos or influencer commentary. Future research should include TikTok and similar platforms to capture a fuller range of digital protest dynamics.

Second, the six-week data collection period captured only the peak phase of public outrage. As an exploratory study focusing on real-time ethnography, the findings reflect early-stage dynamics and do not account for longer-term shifts in sentiment or narrative. Changes that occurred after March 2025—due to institutional responses, news cycles, or fading public interest—were beyond the study's scope. A longitudinal follow-up could provide valuable insight into the sustainability and evolution of cancel culture mobilization.

Third, the reliance on Brand24 and platform algorithms may have introduced bias. The dataset was shaped by keyword-based queries, potentially excluding slang or more nuanced discussions. Additionally, algorithmic prioritization of high-engagement content may have amplified dominant voices while underrepresenting marginalized perspectives. Brand24 also only accesses public data, excluding private accounts and closed communities. While broad keyword searches and manual monitoring were used to mitigate these limitations, full neutrality cannot be guaranteed. These challenges reflect broader methodological issues in digital research and necessitate cautious interpretation.

Despite these limitations, virtual ethnography proved effective in capturing how cancel culture operates as both a form of protest and a communicative practice. It reveals how moral judgments are expressed, public pressure is coordinated, and new forms of accountability are enacted via social media. Within the framework of crisis communication, virtual ethnography exposes not only institutional failures but also the public's capacity to construct counter-narratives. Thus, it is both methodologically appropriate and epistemologically relevant for deconstructing power relations and symbolic dynamics in contemporary Indonesian digital spaces (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Public Perception of the Crisis

Monitoring results from Brand24, as shown in Figure 2, revealed the most commonly used emojis in conversations about Pertamina. The three most prominent were the red double exclamation mark (!!), the fuel pump, and the skull emoji (💀). These symbols should not be dismissed as mere decoration; rather, they function as emotional communication tools that express sarcasm, anger, distrust, and a perceived sense of social threat.

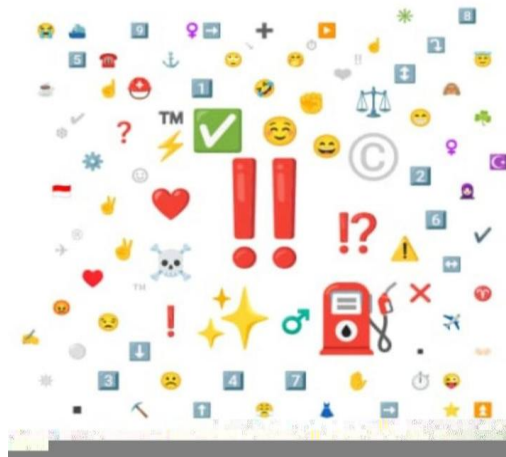


Figure 2. Popular Emojis Related with Pertamina Crisis
Source: Social Media Listening Using Brand24

As Blitvich (2024) argues, cancel culture practices are heavily shaped by moral emotions, with emojis operating as visual mechanisms to articulate disapproval of perceived ethical violations. In this case, the red exclamation mark conveys urgency and alarm, acting as a visual warning. The fuel pump emoji symbolizes the institution under scrutiny, while the skull emoji communicates condemnation, representing notions of danger, decay, and institutional collapse.

Similarly, Krisvianti and Triastuti (2020), in their study of a Facebook community of domestic violence survivors, showed that digital symbols—including emojis—serve as instruments for forging collective identity and solidarity. In the Pertamina case, such symbols played a communicative role within the digital public sphere, enabling users to express resistance against what they perceived as institutional negligence or misconduct.

In addition to the emoji analysis, Brand24 generated a word cloud capturing the most frequently mentioned terms during the Pertamina crisis (Figure 3). The term “corruption” emerged as the most dominant, followed by keywords such as “oil,” “2025,” “fuel” (BBM), “Patra,” “attorney general,” and “crude.” These keywords signal a discursive shift from technical concerns (e.g., engine damage) to broader political and structural critiques involving governance, accountability, and energy policy.



Figure 3. Word Cloud Related to Pertamina Crisis
Source: Social Media Listening Using Brand24

As outlined in agenda-building theory (Dearing & Rogers, 1996), these findings illustrate how the public can shape issue priorities through discourse intensity and symbolic framing. Netizens did not

merely respond passively to media narratives or official statements; rather, they actively constructed a counter-narrative, framing the Pertamina crisis as a case of systemic governance failure.

This shift reflects a broader trend in how crises are publicly interpreted—not as isolated technical errors, but as symptomatic of institutional dysfunction. This supports the findings of Sandi and Triastuti (2020), who observed that digital fan communities often use participatory and symbolic practices to renegotiate power dynamics in virtual spaces.

One of this study's key findings is that cancel culture has evolved beyond targeting individuals—it now encompasses powerful institutions, including state-owned enterprises. In Pertamina's case, cancel culture manifested as a collective, multi-layered digital protest. Expressions included calls to switch to private gas stations. These symbolic boycotts equated the Pertamina logo with the skull emoji, sarcastic tagging of official accounts (@pertamina, @kemnaker), and the viral spread of memes branding Pertamina as part of a "fuel mafia."

These communicative practices reveal that cancel culture has become an organized form of symbolic resistance, driven not merely by emotional reaction but by public frustration over a perceived lack of institutional accountability. As Prakoso (2023) observes, cancel culture intensifies when citizens lack formal avenues for expressing dissatisfaction, turning digital platforms into the primary arena for political commentary and protest.

In this regard, Pertamina failed to implement timely and effective crisis communication. Official responses were only issued after public criticism reached a critical mass. From the perspective of crisis management, this represents a classic example of reputational damage exacerbated by the absence of an early, credible counter-narrative. As Coombs (2007) emphasizes, speed and accuracy are central to successful crisis response; delays can result in significant reputational erosion, as witnessed in this case.

Pertamina's Cancel Culture and Political Intervention

This study also finds that the cancel culture directed at Pertamina did not operate in isolation as a mere critique of corporate misconduct. Instead, it intersected closely with public suspicions of political intervention, weak state oversight, and growing distrust toward political elites. Therefore, the study also examined the political dimension of the situation, particularly as it relates to government policy and political stability affecting Pertamina's business operations (e.g., tax regulations, trade policy, and political dynamics), as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Political Dimensions of Public Discourses on Pertamina

Aspects	Public Discourses	Sources
Energy policy & regulations	<i>A. Misuse of Regulations</i>	https://www.tempo.co/infografik/infografik/kupas-tuntas-kasus-korupsi-pertamina--1214861
	The Pertamina corruption case (2018–2023) exploited loopholes in the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources (ESDM) Regulation No. 18/2021 on the Priority Use of Crude Oil. This regulation mandates Pertamina to prioritize domestic supply. However, corrupt officials deliberately rejected local crude oil in order to maximize imports through illegal procurement schemes.	https://www.tempo.co/hukum/perjalanan-kasus-dugaan-korupsi-pertamina-kejagung-periksa-8-saksi--1216714
	<i>B. Impact of Fuel Subsidies</i>	https://www.tempo.co/hukum/perjalanan-kasus-dugaan-korupsi-pertamina-kejagung-periksa-8-saksi--1216714
	The government politically supports the fuel subsidy policy. However, corruption within Pertamina led to a subsidy overrun of up to IDR 21 trillion (2023). This burdened the state budget (APBN) and reduced the effectiveness of other social programs.	https://www.panduga.id/2025/03/01/senti-men-negatif-publik-ke-pertamina-meroket-capai-98-imbis-kasus-korupsi/
State-owned enterprise	<i>A. Weak Government Oversight</i>	https://www.teropongsenayan.com/134559-mega-korupsi-pertamina-dan-ujian-pemberantasan-korupsi-di-era-prabowo
	Despite being under the coordination of the Ministries of SOEs and Energy, systemic corruption over five years	

Aspects	Public Discourses	Sources
(SOE) oversight	revealed significant failures in both internal and external monitoring—raising suspicions of negligence or complicity by high-level officials. <i>B. Involvement of Political Elites</i> Alleged involvement of individuals close to the political elite is reflected in the lack of decisive action during President Jokowi's administration. The public questions whether the case was deliberately ignored to protect political interests or oligarchic networks.	https://www.teropongsenayan.com/134559-mega-korupsi-pertamina-dan-ujian-pemberantasan-korupsi-di-era-prabowo
Crisis of legitimacy and public trust	<i>A. 98% Negative Sentiment</i> Analysis from Drone Emprit (Feb 2025) shows a public trust crisis towards Pertamina regarding the issue of fuel adulteration and the IDR 193.7 trillion corruption scandal. This may weaken the government's legitimacy in managing state-owned enterprises. <i>B. Government Program vs. Reality</i> The government has promoted energy efficiency and green transition programs. However, the Pertamina corruption scandal has diverted public attention toward the failure of SOE governance.	https://www.panduga.id/2025/03/01/sentimen-negatif-publik-ke-pertamina-meroket-capai-98-imbas-kasus-korupsi/ https://uinsa.ac.id/blog/komunikasi-asap-dan-black-hole-dalam-mega-korupsi-pertamina https://www.panduga.id/2025/03/01/sentimen-negatif-publik-ke-pertamina-meroket-capai-98-imbas-kasus-korupsi/
Legal intervention and power dynamics	<i>A. Role of the Attorney General's Office</i> The naming of nine suspects—including the President Director of Pertamina Patra Niaga, Riva Siahaan—reflects an attempt by the Attorney General's Office to restore the credibility of law enforcement institutions. Nevertheless, the move was considered late and driven more by public pressure than proactive legal action. <i>B. Government Dynamics</i> The public closely observes the government's commitment to anti-corruption efforts. Citizens await concrete actions, including a policy review of the energy sector and the dismantling of oil and gas cartels.	https://radarkediri.jawapos.com/nasional/785698283/jejak-kasus-korupsi-pt-pertamina-dari-2020-2025-kasus-riva-siahaan-paling-banyak-sebabkan-kerugian-negara https://www.tempo.co/infografik/infografik/kupas-tuntas-kasus-korupsi-pertamina--1214861 https://www.teropongsenayan.com/134559-mega-korupsi-pertamina-dan-ujian-pemberantasan-korupsi-di-era-prabowo
National political-economic impact	<i>A. Threats to Energy Stability</i> Pertamina's corruption threatens the national energy supply, particularly if crude oil imports continue to be manipulated. This situation may lead to rising fuel prices and social unrest, including public protests. <i>B. Vulnerability in SOE Governance</i> The Pertamina case highlights the vulnerability of SOEs to political intervention and structural corruption. Without regulatory reform, similar cases	https://www.tempo.co/infografik/infografik/kupas-tuntas-kasus-korupsi-pertamina--1214861 https://www.tempo.co/hukum/perjalanan-kasus-dugaan-korupsi-pertamina-kejakung-periksa-8-saksi--1216714 https://radarkediri.jawapos.com/nasional/785698283/jejak-kasus-korupsi-pt-pertamina-dari-2020-2025-kasus-riva-siahaan-paling-banyak-sebabkan-kerugian-negara

Aspects	Public Discourses	Sources
	are likely to recur in other strategic sectors.	kerugian-negara https://goodstats.id/article/jejak-kasus-korupsi-di-lingkungan-pertamina-dalam-5-tahun-terakhir-BIRNz

(source: Online media)

Findings from this political analysis indicate that the Pertamina corruption case allegedly exploited regulatory loopholes, particularly those found in Ministerial Regulation No. 18/2021, which allows for the prioritization of domestic crude oil use. However, this provision was manipulated to justify unlawful imports, leading to a fuel subsidy overrun of up to IDR 21 trillion. This not only placed significant pressure on the national budget but also disrupted the implementation of other social programs.

The analysis further reveals that government oversight mechanisms failed to prevent or detect corruption over several years, reinforcing public suspicions of either negligence or complicity by senior officials. Data from Drone Emprit (2025) shows that 98% of online sentiment toward Pertamina was negative. Netizens widely questioned the government's commitment to anti-corruption, with digital conversations frequently referencing figures such as "Ahok," "Prabowo," the "Minister of Energy," and terms like "oligarchy," "subsidy," and "fuel mafia."

These findings suggest that the public no longer views economic, political, and moral issues as distinct. Instead, the crisis has catalyzed a broader, systemic critique of governance and state-business relations. From the perspective of digital culture, this aligns with Blitvich's (2024) view that cancel culture extends beyond social punishment—it becomes a mode of civic articulation and identity construction. The public is no longer merely demanding institutional reform but advocating for a transformation in the value systems and power structures that underlie those institutions.

Digital Space as a Democratic Arena

The Pertamina cancel culture phenomenon affirms that social media has become a space for emotional democracy, where citizens channel anger, disappointment, and frustration into symbolic pressure on institutions. The strategic use of emojis, hashtags, and viral keywords accelerates public polarization (Kevin, 2023) and even poses risks of social fragmentation (Afifi et al., 2018).

Interestingly, in Indonesia, cancel culture sometimes increases the popularity of the figure being "canceled" (Putri et al., 2024). By contrast, in global contexts, cancel culture more often leads to career destruction and severe psychological consequences (Djamzuri & Mulyana, 2024). In a hyperconnected world, as explored by Luthfiyah and Fadillah (2024), the digital realm becomes a space where citizens test the boundaries of group affiliation, power structures, solidarity, and mechanisms of public scrutiny (Mayasari, 2022).

In this light, cancel culture targeting Pertamina should not be seen as irrational mass hatred but rather as a response to a crisis of trust rooted in institutional communication failure and structural inefficiency—social media functions as a substitute for public discourse, especially in the absence of formal channels. As with the Facebook-based community of domestic violence survivors studied by Krisvianti & Triastuti (2020), netizens formed temporary digital communities united by a shared experience of state failure.

The Pertamina case vividly illustrates crisis communication failure in the digital age. According to Coombs (2007), organizations facing crises are expected to respond swiftly, with empathy and transparency, to rebuild public trust. In this case, however, Pertamina was late in entering the public narrative, leaving digital spaces to be filled by assumptions, wild interpretations, and symbolic mockery that further damaged institutional credibility.

This situation highlights that in the digital era, effective crisis communication requires not only speed but also the ability to interpret public emotional dynamics in real-time (Traversa et al., 2023). When the public experiences frustration, symbols such as emojis, memes, and hashtags become more powerful tools of resistance than written opinion alone. Social media allows the public to "cancel" institutions morally, even before any legal accountability is established. For this reason, cancel culture cannot be reduced to digital hatred; it must be understood as a form of social control born from systemic failure.

This phenomenon also reinforces the relevance of agenda-building theory in contemporary public communication. Public agendas are no longer shaped exclusively by mainstream media or political elites but are instead built through horizontal interactions among netizens—united by algorithms, culture, emotions, and shared experiences (Matradewi, 2024). In Pertamina’s case, the public did not wait for media coverage or government action; they constructed the narrative, reinforced it with visual content, and spread it as symbolic pressure.

As Dearing & Rogers (1996) explained, agenda-building is a collaborative process involving actors capable of shaping public attention. Today, that capacity no longer belongs solely to traditional media—it now lies with the public itself. Netizens have become active agents in constructing “crisis maps” and directing the discourse. This is consistent with Sandi & Triastuti’s (2020) reading of digital communities as authentic, egalitarian, and reflective spaces for political articulation—even if they are not formally organized.

Cancel culture, in this case, is inseparable from a broader crisis of public trust in the state. This study shows that netizens do not cancel institutions merely because of poor products, but because they perceive these institutions as symbols of systemic political and economic failure. The cancel culture directed at Pertamina served as a medium for civic expression without formal political spaces. It represents resistance to elite narrative dominance, while also asserting a claim over a more autonomous and equal digital public sphere.

While this study finds strong evidence that Indonesian netizens used cancel culture to voice moral outrage and demand institutional accountability, interpreting these practices as forms of digital democracy requires nuance. The use of sarcastic emojis, viral hashtags, and memes reflects symbolic participation and collective meaning-making. However, the inherently emotional and viral nature of such discourse also raises questions about inclusivity, reflexivity, and the potential for oversimplification of complex issues.

Cancel culture has been praised as a mechanism of civic engagement in digital publics, providing a space where citizens can exercise horizontal pressure on powerful actors (Blitvich, 2024). In the Pertamina case, netizens bypassed institutional gatekeepers, shaped their own narrative, and directed symbolic sanctions toward a state-owned company. This aligns with the logic of bottom-up agenda-building, especially in a context where formal political channels are perceived as inadequate or inaccessible.

Yet, this democratic potential must be weighed against the risks of polarization and exclusion. As Prakoso (2023) argues, cancel culture can devolve into mob-driven attacks without critical reflection or verification. The dominance of particular narratives—amplified by platform algorithms—can marginalize minority perspectives or silence alternative explanations. Djamzuri and Mulyana (2024) further highlight that what begins as moral protest can easily slide into digital vigilantism, where public opinion becomes weaponized rather than deliberative.

In this sense, the Pertamina cancel culture movement represents both an assertion of digital citizenship and a challenge to inclusive public discourse. It demonstrates how netizens assert power to demand transparency. Yet, it also raises the possibility that symbolic punishment, such as mass labeling, ridicule, or boycott, may suppress complexity or produce a chilling effect on dissent.

Thus, cancel culture in this context is best understood not simply as a manifestation of digital democracy but as a *contested form of public participation*, simultaneously enabling civic expression while risking moral absolutism and populist exclusion. Recognizing this ambivalence is essential for assessing the role of digital publics in shaping institutional accountability.

Aligned with Blitvich (2024), cancel culture operates as a collective action driven by group identity and community moral consciousness (Arianto, 2024). In the Indonesian context, this expression takes on a distinctive linguistic form—a blend of sarcasm, sharp criticism, and dark humor. This is reflected in the word cloud and emoji analysis, which reveal the emotional intensity and symbolic depth of digital discourse.

These findings have broad implications for both communication scholarship and institutional governance practices. First, it is crucial for state institutions to understand that having a social media presence is not sufficient. Effective crisis communication requires participatory, adaptive, and empathy-based strategies. Second, the government must interpret digital dynamics as reflections of public trust in the system, not merely as fleeting viral trends.

Third, cancel culture directed at institutions reveals that Indonesian society is transforming a digitally conscious public that asserts its right to social oversight. If not properly managed, this trend can evolve into widespread cynicism. Some scholars have even argued that cancel culture, if co-opted

by specific actors, can harm the inclusivity of the public sphere (Kurniawan et al., 2022). Therefore, while cancel culture can serve as a tool to uphold social responsibility, it also carries the potential for injustice and the misuse of public opinion (Djamzuri & Mulyana, 2024). It must thus be interpreted wisely, as a symbolic democratic mechanism that, when appropriately channeled, can strengthen institutional accountability.

In summary, this study not only reveals how cancel culture was mobilized against Pertamina, but also demonstrates how crisis communication failures, poor governance, and civic political articulation intersect in digital spaces. These findings are evidence that society no longer remains silent or passive—they form opinions, mobilize solidarity, and apply social pressure independently through complex and reflective digital mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

Cancel culture cannot be eliminated from the digital sphere, as it is a product of a public that has become increasingly critical and interconnected. However, institutions capable of understanding and responding to cancel culture wisely may be able to rebuild public trust and reinforce their social legitimacy. Companies must comprehend the logic of cancel culture by developing meaningful and empathetic communication strategies.

Cancel culture is not merely an emotional reaction or a fleeting digital trend. It represents a deeper reflection of a public trust crisis. Through social media, the digital public is capable of constructing narratives, expressing moral outrage, and mobilizing collective action against institutions perceived to violate shared values or fail to be responsive. Cancel culture has moved beyond individual targets. It now challenges institutions, exposes power structures, and demands systemic change. It functions as a form of digital resistance against inequality, opacity, and the manipulation of information. The dominance of visual symbols (emojis) and specific keywords serves as both a visual expression and a political articulation of the public.

This study contributes to communication theory by broadening the conceptual scope of crisis communication, agenda-building, and cancel culture in the digital age. It highlights how *bottom-up public pressure*—manifested through satire, emojis, and viral discourse—can challenge institutional legitimacy, reshaping the traditional top-down crisis response model. The findings demonstrate that the digital public now possesses agenda-setting power that was once exclusive to elites and mainstream media. Furthermore, by extending the analysis of cancel culture to state-owned institutions, this research reframes it not only as a tool of protest against individuals but also as a form of collective moral regulation. Methodologically, the study validates the relevance of virtual ethnography for capturing symbolic and emotional dynamics of digital activism. These insights pave the way for future research into the intersection of public discourse, legitimacy, and symbolic power in hyperconnected societies.

The study offers important implications for public communication, policy governance, and sociology. First, state-owned enterprises must reformulate their approach to public communication by emphasizing transparency, responsiveness, and openness to dialogue in digital spaces. Second, the government should evaluate regulatory loopholes that enable corruption and enhance oversight and accountability mechanisms for state-owned entities. Third, netizens have demonstrated their capacity to produce independent narratives and forge solidarity through social media. This reflects a form of discursive democratization that should be supported rather than silenced.

Based on the findings, this study recommends the following actions. First, state-owned enterprises should establish responsive digital crisis management teams. These teams must be equipped to read public sentiment, manage online discourse, and issue strategic clarifications. Second, social media should be managed not merely as a promotional channel, but as a dialogic space that actively involves the public. Third, the government must ensure the transparency of public data so that citizens can access valid information and avoid falling victim to disinformation. Fourth, digital literacy should be strengthened to cultivate critical awareness among netizens regarding their rights to monitor state institutions through digital platforms.

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