

Not your ordinary catfishing story: The role of cancel culture behind the hashtag #SamMoralesIsOver

Bonne Cañal, Ira Capuyan, Hannah del Pilar,
Myril Eloise Enolpe, and Susan Loseo

Abstract

This study examined the role of cancel culture behind the hashtag #SamMoralesIsOver to determine how it affected the LGBTQ+ catfishing victims' courage to speak out. The hashtag refers to the online "cancellation" of multimedia artist Sam Morales after trans woman Jzan Vern Tero disclosed how Sam catfished her into an 8-month relationship. A focus group discussion was conducted among eight LGBTQ+ members who were either catfishing victims or shared or retweeted tweets with the said hashtag. Responses were analyzed using the theories of Convergence Culture, Spiral of Silence, and Empowerment. Findings showed that LGBTQ+ members define cancel culture as an online phenomenon involving a group of persons condemning offensive and displeasing acts, beliefs, or certain stigmas in an attempt to demand accountability from the perceived offender. Participants find Twitter the most convenient platform for cancel culture. The catfishing victims' decision to speak out are influenced by these factors: relatability, raising awareness, and the perpetrator's reason for catfishing. Cancel culture has a significant role in promoting awareness about the ongoing struggles of minority groups like the LGBTQ+ community.

Keywords: cancel culture, LGBTQ+ community, catfishing, Twitter, online

Plaridel Open Access Policy Statement

As a service to authors, contributors, and the community, *Plaridel: A Philippine Journal of Communication, Media, and Society* provides open access to all its content. To ensure that all articles are accessible to readers and researchers, these are available for viewing and download (except Early View) from the *Plaridel* journal website, provided that the journal is properly cited as the original source and that the downloaded content is not modified or used for commercial purposes. *Plaridel*, published by the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>).

How to cite this article in APA

Cañal, B., Capuyan, I., del Pilar, H., Enolpe, M. E., & Loseo, S. (2022). Not your ordinary catfishing story: The role of cancel culture behind the hashtag #SamMoralesisOver. *Plaridel*, 19(1), 91-113. <https://doi.org/10.52518/2022.19.1-02ccpel>

Introduction

In March 30 of 2020, a Twitter thread posted by a transgender woman with the username @JzanVern narrated in detail how Sam Morales, a filmmaker in the Philippine fashion industry, was the mastermind behind a catfishing scheme she had experienced for over 8 months (“People Call for Boycott,” 2020). The series of tweets, “I got catfished: a (really long) thread,” has since been retweeted over 80,000 times, has more than 248,000 likes, and has around 117,000 quote tweets. It resulted in a media firestorm, trending the hashtags #SamMoralesIsOver and #EndSamMorales on Twitter. Following Jzan Vern’s Twitter thread accusing Morales, other alleged victims, all from the LGBTQ+ community, have since spoken up, along with netizens’ call for the Philippine fashion industry to boycott Sam Morales’ services as she was said to be affiliated with brands such as H&M and Jag (Garcia, 2020). The #SamMoralesIsOver issue that went viral on Twitter, where the LGBTQ+ community held Sam Morales to account for her catfishing scheme, is an example of cancel culture. It has shown how collective power online is used to demand action and accountability from Morales. Since cancel culture is a relatively new phenomenon, research studies are quite limited and are often centered around case studies on its effects on public figures, companies, or businesses like in the studies by Velasco (2020) and Nguyen (2020). However, this research aimed to focus on the influence, particularly some form of empowerment, that victims of condemned perpetrators gain through this movement. In this case, the researchers, using the theories of Spiral of Silence, Convergence Culture, and Empowerment, looked at the factors in cancel culture in Twitter that contributed to the emergence of victims’ accounts of LGBTQ+ members who, like Jzan Vern, were subjected to abusive experiences like catfishing and manipulation.

“Understanding How Young People Experience Risk with Online-to-Offline Sexual Encounters: A Second Qualitative Phase for the CH@T Project” by Elizabeth Marwah (2015) analyzed young people’s usage of online platforms in building romantic relationships, and in its findings established culturally-appropriate sexual health communication and education for the youth in the United States. The study took into account the MTV series *Catfish: The TV Show’s* definition of catfishing, which is “[pretending] to be someone you’re not online by posting false information, such as someone else’s pictures, on social media sites usually with the intention of getting someone to fall in love with you” (p. 3).

Joseph Velasco’s (2020) article “You are Cancelled: Virtual Collective Consciousness and the Emergence of Cancel Culture as Ideological Purging,” examined the implications of cancel culture through the lens of “virtual collective consciousness” (p. 2) in a case study done on Cat Arambulo-

Antonio, a Filipino public figure who experienced being “cancelled” during the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Her commentary on a CNN report about a citizen’s breach of quarantine protocols received backlash due to its insensitive nature, disregarding the welfare of workers forced to resume their jobs despite the pandemic. Velasco labeled cancel culture as “one of the highest displays of the democratization of discourse” (p. 6) and concluded that it has transformed into a destructive form of critique, a form of public condemnation in the digital age aimed to strip cancelled subjects of their social roles and titles. In the study “Cancel Culture on Twitter: The Effects of Information Source and Messaging on Post Shareability and Perceptions of Corporate Greenwashing,” Brandon Nguyen (2020) described cancel culture as sparking dialogue, encouraging public commentary, and amplifying the prevalence of negative posts on Twitter. It crafts a negative bias against the shareability of posts. He concluded that Twitter usage entails some underlying motives which may be an important consideration in how users interact with content.

In the article “Cancel Culture is Chaotic Good,” Chi Luu (2019) asked if the power of the cancel culture phenomenon has become too destructive. He explained that while the act of reactionary crowds such as public shaming and shunning (e.g. scarlet letters) have always been seen as historically problematic and negative (Drury, 2002, as cited in Luu, 2019), cancel culture is less severe because it is mostly linguistic and communicative. However, it is perceived to be more extreme because it is unconstrained geographically and can spread information, including rumors and criticism, faster and easier, involves a large number of people making it more uncontrollable, and can be damaging when put in wrong contexts (Luu, 2019).

Gyo Hyun Koo (2019) in “The Silence Breakers: Understanding Social, Psychological, And Contextual Factors That Influenced The Development Of The #Metoo Movement Based On Spiral Of Silence Theory,” used the aforementioned theory in understanding the driving force of the #MeToo movement and other gender issues. The theory explains how an “opinion climate that is perceived as hostile discourages one’s willingness to express opinions in many situations” (Stoycheff, 2006, as cited in Koo, 2019, page or para), Individuals hesitate to express their opinion for fear of isolation from the congruent opinions of the majority. However, the SOS Theory recognizes social media as a platform “offering an environment where people can share their thoughts, find common ground, and advocate for social issues” (De Choudhury et al. in Koo, 2019, p. 1). Their study demonstrated that people who have a higher contextual fear of isolation are more likely to speak out, because the #metoo movement, which facilitates people’s sharing about

their experiences of harassment and assault, helps others understand these experiences, turning fear into courage.

Rachel Cantrell (2016) in “Convergence Culture and Competing Literacy Sponsors In Post-Arab Spring Movements” analyzed how activists in the Post-Arab Spring Protest Movements utilized social media to “open up dialogues within their communities to enact social change...” (p. iv). Convergence Culture Theory was used as the event marked a point where social media began to play a major role in political movements. Focusing on participatory culture in convergence culture, the theory indicates, contrary to the old media’s notion of spectatorship, that an individual has the “power to shape and contribute to media production” (Condis, 2015, as cited in Stahl, 2017), indicating not just a passive consumer but an active one. The findings of this study showed that social media platforms “serve as a vital literacy sponsor for protesters worldwide in that they provide an indispensable platform for communicating and spreading their literacy artifacts” (p. 108).

In the article “Queer Identity Management and Political Self-Expression on Social Networking Sites: A Co-Cultural Approach to the Spiral of Silence,” Jesse Fox and Katie Warber (2015) investigated communicative practices employed by queer-identified individuals on Facebook. By synthesizing co-cultural theory and the spiral of silence, their study showed that participants who are still in the closet experience a spiral of silence where they are silenced by the heteronormative majority. Participants who are out, however, reveal a ‘spiral of silencing’ as they use the site’s affordances by friending, grouping, blocking, and unfriending individuals to empower their vocal minority and silence the dominant group.

Lastly, in the article “Gay-Straight Alliances: Youth Empowerment and Working toward Reducing Stigma of LGBT Youth,” Maralee Mayberry (2012) applies Marc Zimmerman’s three levels of empowerment to examine the ways in which Gay-Straight Alliance members are empowered (or not) to challenge the heteronormative culture against which their sexual identity is stigmatized. Data is derived from a study of GSAs in four high schools located in a large metropolitan school district in the southeastern United States. Focusing on psychological empowerment, or individual behaviors designed to influence social and political environments through participation in organizations and their activities, results showed that GSA members are aware of how ubiquitous anti-gay attitudes are in high school environments. They also understand how “silence” sustains heterosexual and homophobic school cultures. “Speaking out” is a means for them to resist taken-for-granted school practices that result in their marginalization and inability to be full participants in their educational settings. The

study suggested that GSAs successfully empower their members on a psychological level to “speak out” against anti-gay sentiments and behaviors but are still limited by fear of parental and community resistance in their ability to develop into fully empowered organizations.

In these studies, it can be seen that although empowerment for the LGBTQ+ community is consciously cultivated in schools, there is still much to be done for it to be amplified in the bigger community. Furthermore, the theories of Spiral of Silence and Convergence Culture emphasize the emergence of culture of participation and individuals speaking up from different online phenomenon and cancel culture as an example of an online phenomenon that operates in social media. This present study adapted the theories of Spiral of Silence, Convergence Culture, and Empowerment to find out how cancel culture led to the participation and empowerment of the LGBTQ+ community in the Sam Morales catfishing issue on Twitter, and see if the “climate of opinion” towards the LGBTQ+ community has transformed for the their betterment and opened the discussion of the continuing prejudice against them. Cancel culture is a form of “citizen justice” with netizens publicly and collectively shaming perpetrators (Mielczarek, 2018). While it has served as a catalyst to forward the calls for justice, not much information about issues concerning specifically the LGBTQ+ community is available.

Specifically, the researchers aimed to:

1. Determine how the LGBTQ+ community defines the term “cancel culture”;
2. Examine how LGBTQ+ victims use social networks in the call for “cancelling” catfishers who target the LGBTQ+ community in social media;
3. Identify the factors that affected the LGBTQ+ catfishing victims’ decision to speak out and participate in cancel culture and;
4. Identify the role of cancel culture in promoting awareness about the continuing struggle of the LGBTQ+ community.

Spiral of Silence

The Spiral of Silence (SOS) Theory, according to Griffin (2008), was originally proposed in 1974 by the German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann to describe the likelihood of people to remain silent when they feel that their views oppose the prevailing public opinion. This theory hypothesizes that people choose to remain silent due to the fear of isolation and reprisal. Individuals suppress their voices out of fear that speaking out will result in negative consequences. According to Noelle-Nuemann (1974, as cited by Griffin, 2008), the greater the gap between our own opinion and

the prevailing public opinion, the lesser the likelihood for us to voice out our own opinion.

Convergence Culture

Convergence culture is a term coined in 2006 by Henry Jenkins in his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, where he examined three concepts: media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence.

Jenkins (2006a) defined “convergence” as the flow of content across multiple media platforms. In traditional media, it is often perceived that consumers are merely passive receivers of messages. However, due to the advent of new technologies, pieces of information are made readily available regardless of place and time, and consumers are now given the opportunity to participate as producers as well. Consumption then becomes a collective process. This is where Jenkins’ (2006a) concept of collective intelligence comes in. According to Jenkins, each of us knows something and when we put pieces of information together, we create a pool of resources paving a way for us to know everything. Thus, in a participatory culture, the circulation of media depends heavily on the active participation of consumers (Jenkins, 2006a).

Convergence culture, according to Jenkins (2006b), represents a paradigm shift from medium-specific content to content that flows across multiple channels. He also pointed out that convergence culture provides consumers a wide array of ways to access media content, thereby increasing the interdependence of communication systems

Empowerment Theory

According to Perkins & Zimmerman (1995), the Empowerment Theory tackles the connection of an individual to his/her society, which creates an environment of support. They defined empowerment as the process of giving power to one and integrating the individual potential into a group. In turn, the collective power and effort are directed to achieving a desired effect. In addition, the primary goal of Empowerment Theory is to explain the process and efforts made by marginalized individuals or communities to exert control over and influence their choices, transforming them into desired outcomes touching on both personal and communal life (Rappaport, 1987, as cited in Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995).

Empowerment Theory is a platform for the marginalized to speak out and warrants empathy. Rather than pass judgment, it investigates factors that contribute to the existence of social dilemmas (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995). In *The Empowerment Process: Integrating Theory and Practice*, Jay Conger and Rabindra Kanungo (1988) stated that Empowerment Theory

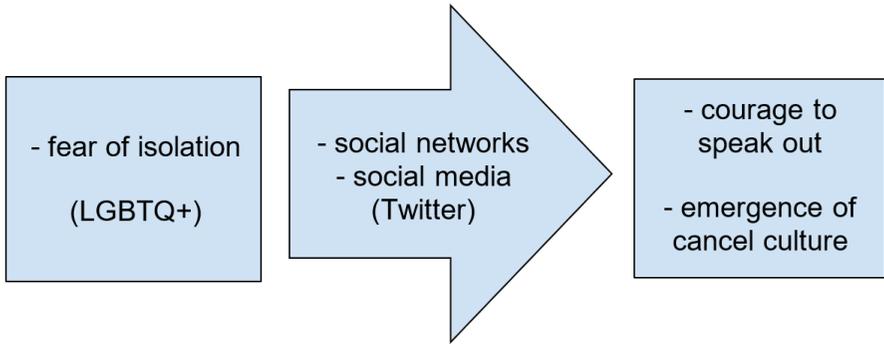
serves as a defense against weakness and voicelessness – especially of those in the vulnerable minority.

According to Mayberry (2013), Zimmerman posits three levels of analysis: individual or psychological, organizational level, and communal. The individual level of analysis suggests that individuals gain mastery and control over their lives and a critical understanding of their environment. This involves three components: 1) intrapersonal, which refers to the capacity to influence social and political systems that are significant to them, 2) interactional, which refers to the interaction between individuals and their environments that enable them to master their social and political systems, and 3) behavioral, which refers to the participation of individuals with the goal to influence their social and political environment (Mayberry, 2013).

For the second level of analysis, Mayberry (2013) stated that the organizational level of analysis suggests that organizations are empowering when they can equip their members with opportunities to develop skills and a sense of control, are able to meet their organizational goals, and thrive against their competitors. As for the third level of analysis, which is the communal level of analysis, she stated that an empowered community is comprised of members who strive to improve their living conditions and initiate efforts to improve their community through collective action.

The Spiral of Silence hypothesizes that marginalized groups tend to remain silent when their views oppose those of the majority's for fear of being isolated (citation). However, through convergence culture, or the emergence of new media technologies that enable participatory culture, various media platforms have become outlets for people to voice out their opinions. . Convergence culture provides platforms to break the spiral of silence among victims, leading them towards empowerment. Marginalized groups get to speak up about silenced social issues. and minority viewpoints are amplified on both the individual and community levels. Individual and collaborative views are consolidated and validated by those who experienced the same situation. More specifically, empowerment. Thus, the emergence of cancel culture, giving LGBTQ+ catfishing victims the courage to speak out.

Figure 1. Operational Framework



Method

This research employed a phenomenological approach as it is concerned with the lived experience of LGBTQ+ catfishing victims. The fundamental goal of this approach was to arrive at a description of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013) which is, in this case, cancel culture. This approach entailed gathering “deep” information and perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, discussions, and participant observation, and representing them from the perspective of the research participant(s) (Lester, 1999).

The researchers used the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) method in data collection, where a group of people are interviewed regarding a specific topic and are guided by a moderator. Focus groups can be used to help “generate important insights into topics that are not well understood” (Berg, 2009, as cited in Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2018, p. 175). In order to secure an in-depth understanding of cancel culture, the researchers relied on group dynamics and group interaction to surface new and varied perspectives that may otherwise be inaccessible by interviewing an individual.

To determine how LGBTQ+ members define “cancel culture,” each participant was asked to share their own definitions during the conducted focus group discussion. To examine the function of social networks in magnifying the calls for justice, the theory of Convergence Culture was used to study participatory tweets using the hashtags #SamMoralesIsOver and #EndSamMorales. To identify the factors that drove catfishing victims to share their experiences and participate in cancel culture on social media, participants’ responses were analyzed relative to the claims of the Spiral of Silence Theory. To identify the role of cancel culture in the awareness of the continuing struggles of marginalized groups, specifically the LGBTQ+ community, varying perspectives from the focus group discussion were consolidated and interpreted using the Empowerment Theory.

Eight research respondents were chosen through a non-probability convenience sampling. The participants must fit to at least two of the following criteria: 1) a member of the LGBTQ+ community; 2) a victim of catfishing and; 3) a participant in the #SamMoralesIsOver issue on Twitter. The table below shows the profile of respondents based on the qualifications set by the researchers.

Table 1. Profile of respondents.

Participant	Age	Gender Identity	Victim of Catfishing	Form of Participation
A	21	Gay	No	Retweeted & Liked tweets with #SamMoralesIsOver
B	17	Prefer not to say	No	Retweeted & Liked tweets with #SamMoralesIsOver
C	22	Gay	Yes	Retweeted & Liked tweets with #SamMoralesIsOver
D	20	Bisexual	No	Shared screenshots of tweets with #SamMoralesIsOver on Facebook
E	22	Pansexual	Yes	Quote Retweeted and Retweeted tweets with #SamMoralesIsOver
F	20	Bisexual	Yes	Retweeted & Liked tweets with #SamMoralesIsOver
G	21	Pansexual	No	Liked tweets with #SamMoralesIsOver
H	17	Gay	No	Quote Retweeted, Retweeted & Liked tweets with #SamMoralesIsOver

As there were already many catfishing issues circulating on the Internet, the researchers chose to limit the scope to the LGBTQ+ community. This study anchored on the Sam Morales catfishing issue that was revealed on Twitter by Jzan Vern, a transgender woman.

Findings

Cancel culture for the LGBTQ+ community

When asked about what cancel culture is, participant A said (and implied by participant E), “[it] is calling out people on social media from their bad actions/behaviors or platforms.” For participant B, “[c]ancel culture is like, *murag ireject nimo ang isa ka* belief or like, um, stigma or like a person *nga*

nagbuhat or displeasing *na* act or like relevant to everyone, something like that.” [Cancel culture for me is like rejecting a belief, stigma, or a person who does a displeasing act that is relevant to everyone]. Participant C saw it as a “movement to persuade other people to not support a person as well and anything he or she does in the future.” Meanwhile, participant G stated that cancel culture is when “you ostracize a specific person when they present something or like an idea that is offensive to a lot of people and it’s like the rest of the people in that society also go against them because in cancel culture, [it is like] a domino effect.” Participant D defined cancel culture as an act of “informing everyone in social media platforms [that] a certain behavior or issue should be stopped or cancelled.” For participant E, “[i]t’s like an online form of revolution to, like, topple down an idea or...or a behavior, or a person’s doing.” Lastly, according to participant H, cancel culture happens “when people or communities attack a person/s with a platform when the said person has stated a comment or committed an action that the people deem offensive and slanderous,” and that the reactions of the offended person or group “may range from halting their support for the offender and creating a hashtag usually #personisover or sending the influencer death threats.”

According to Nguyen (2020) in the study “Cancel Culture on Twitter: The Effects of Information Source and Messaging on Post Shareability and Perceptions of Corporate Greenwashing,” cancel culture thrives in online conversations by encouraging the circulation of opinions on topics about people, establishments, or anything that is being cancelled online.

Based on the participants’ definitions, the researchers redefined cancel culture as an online phenomenon where a group of persons condemn offensive and displeasing acts, beliefs, or stigmas in an attempt to demand accountability. It is done by attacking the offender’s platform, participating in calls for withdrawal of support (e.g. “Is Over Party” hashtags), and sending threatening messages. The LGBTQ+ participants identify cancel culture as an online phenomenon where they can participate in discussions virtually. Since convergence culture paved the way for media convergence, online platforms have been created where people can share their opinions. These platforms empower marginalized groups to voice out their side (Rappaport, 1981, 1984, as cited in Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). In the avenue of online participation, the marginalized are given the power to speak out.

In this study, the participants mentioned that participating in cancel culture movements is a way to demand accountability from offenders. By participating in the cancel culture movement, the individual potentials in the LGBTQ+ community (the marginalized group in this case) are

integrated into one collective power to achieve their desired effect. Hence, cancel culture is a movement where marginalized groups are empowered.

Function of social networks in magnifying calls for justice

For this objective, the participants were asked what social media platforms they used to participate in cancel culture, what personal experiences they shared, why they chose to share them online, and what other issues about cancelling they participated in.

All the participants used Twitter in participating in cancel culture movements. However, in the #SamMoralesIsOver issue, seven participated on Twitter while participant D saw the issue first on a Facebook post—actually a shared tweet—and reposted it. They opted for Twitter because, as participant C said, “opinionated people can be found on Twitter.” Participants B and E volunteered the idea that “even when they don’t know each other, there is a discussion of different opinions and people are more open” and users “can easily reply and discuss.” Participants A and G used Twitter because of its Trending Topics feature that makes following an issue fast and easy. Both also mentioned that they used to participate in cancel culture but “stopped because of past experience where other participants tried to cancel a person with a half-baked opinion that could’ve been corrected.” For participant F, Twitter, unlike other social media platforms, possessed a unique algorithm where hashtags can lead the users to different posts about the topic. Participant D pointed out that Twitter was easy to use for Millennials and Gen Zs. Twitter features a word count limit per post, making it easier for people to read, and affording it a wider reach compared to other social media platforms.

On sharing personal experiences, all of them said that they did not share theirs online. Rather, they chose to share personal experiences with close friends and family. Most of them “just retweet[ed] and g[a]ve opinions” to “make everyone aware” of the issue. Participant D mentioned that retweeting others’ experiences was his way of supporting the victim.

Besides the #SamMoralesIsOver issue, the respondents participated in other hashtag campaigns too. Participant A said that he participated in the Boycott Ansel Elgort issue, which was about Elgort, a celebrity who had allegedly sexually assaulted a minor. Participants D, E, and F participated in #NasaanAngPangulo (Where is the President) to call out President Duterte for skipping a super typhoon press briefing. Participant E took part in #shanedawsonisoverparty calling out American YouTuber Shane Dawson who joked about race and bestiality. Participant F engaged in #OustDuterte, a call to oust the Philippine president, and the Johnny Depp and Amber Heard issue where Heard was targeted by her former husband’s fans after

he lost the libel battle. Participant C engaged in The James Charles and Tati Westbrook issue (two beauty influencers feuding when Charles promoted products from Westbrook's direct competitor) and the #NoCongoNoPhone (a call against the exploitation of children and the destruction of resources of the Republic of Congo where most smartphone batteries come from). Participant B joined #BoycottMulan, which stemmed from the actress Liu Yifei's support for police brutality in Hong Kong. Participant G participated in the Lana del Rey issue to call out del Rey for pulling down women of color like Cardi B, Ariana, and Beyonce in her Instagram post. Finally, participant H joined movements against Jeffree Star (who was accused of racism), the Ace family (one of YouTube's biggest family of vloggers where the father was accused of rape), Gabbie Hanna (a social media influencer and vlogger whose past offensive social media posts resurfaced), Jaclyn Hill (an influencer whose makeup products were of poor quality and were said to be contaminated), Trisha Paytas (who posted a video that contained sweeping remarks about LGBTQ+ members), and Nikita Dragun (a beauty influencer who artificially darkened her skin tone and tweeted "what race is nikita gonna be today?").

Convergence Culture Theory states that media convergence consequently provides media users the chance to participate not just as message consumers, like in the past, but as message creators, too (Jenkins, 2006a). In this study, all participants had participated on Twitter by sharing ideas and interacting with other users. They did not just consume the messages they received through social media but also generated their opinions and shared online to let others know and be aware of the issue.

Convergence culture counters the tendency of minorities to keep silent over some issues when their opinion is different from the majority (as stated in the Spiral of Silence Theory). The existence of platforms itself encourages everyone to speak out. Three participants who were victims of catfishing used Twitter to warn others about this phenomenon by retweeting posts from others who had experiences similar to theirs. They viewed the act of retweeting #SamMoralesIsOver tweets as their way of cancelling catfishers who targeted the LGBTQ+ community in social media.

Lastly, convergence culture allows consumers to access and consume media and media content that increases "the interdependence of communication systems" (Jenkins, 2006a). One participant said that he first saw an issue on a social media platform that was different from the one he was currently on. Hence, convergence culture not only gives access to information and facilitates the sharing of opinions, but also allows cross-media message consumption.

Factors affecting the LGBTQ+ catfishing victims to speak out and participate in cancel culture

To identify the motivating factors, the participants were asked what affected their decision to speak out and participate in the cancelling of Sam Morales.

Participant F said he found the story and how it unraveled in the Twitter thread interesting. Participants A, E, and H said they participated in the issue because the elaborate catfishing scheme the victim experienced was “on a different level.” In particular, participant E, also a catfishing victim, “felt bad” for the victim because he experienced it as well: “And personally speaking, I experienced thrice. Three times of people catfishing me on the internet...Those three times can’t compare unto what the victim of Sam Morales went through.” Similarly, participant C said, “I also experienced the same thing where I traveled for someone. And it turns out, they are not who they say they were. So, I was enraged by what happened.”

Participant H, who identified as gay, said “I could project myself onto her position,” and believed that “justice should be served.” Participants C and D said they wanted to raise awareness of the situation, and to remind people to be careful on the internet. Participant D said if Sam Morales had not been called out and people did not participate in the issue, “*mapadayon to siya and mudako na nuon ang damage*” [she would have continued and there could have been more damage]. Lastly, participants B, G, and H were motivated by the homophobia and transphobia fanned by Sam Morales’s catfishing.

According to the Spiral of Silence (SOS) Theory, marginalized groups, to which the LGBTQ+ community belongs, are more likely to stay silent on issues when their opinions do not align with the majority’s due to fear of isolation. However, the emergence of social media platforms like Twitter provided venues where people can “find common ground and advocate social issues” (De Choudhury et al., 2016, as cited in Koo, 2019, p. 1). Such is the case of the #MeToo movement, which inspired women to go online about their sexual harassment experiences. In this study, all respondents participated in social media by retweeting, liking, or sharing the victim’s posts, and two of them posted about the #SamMoralesIsOver issue by quote-tweeting Twitter threads initiated by an LGBTQ+ member. The participants were able to share their experiences, demand accountability from Sam Morales, shed light on their struggles as a community, and turn their fear of isolation into empowerment. This was made possible by the community environment cultivated on Twitter.

As described by Empowerment Theory, existing tweets about the issue motivated the participants to also speak up about their own opinions and

experiences with the hope that calling out Sam Morales will raise awareness about catfishing and victimizing members of the LGBTQ+ community. In this sense, participants were empowered to participate in cancel culture by seeing tweets about similar experiences. At the same time, they participated in cancel culture to empower others through educating people.

Role of cancel culture in promoting awareness of the continuing struggle of the LGBTQ+ community

The participants were asked what they think were the advantages and disadvantages of cancel-culture in the #SamMoralesisOver issue, the positive and negative consequences of the hashtag itself, the impact of the issue to their community online, and the value of cancel culture in their personal lives.

For the advantages, six respondents answered that cancel culture promoted awareness. It disproved the stereotype that LGBTQ+ community members were catfishers, and showed how being victimized, as participant B put it, “does not only happen to straight people.” Participant C said that cancel culture “taught the perpetrators a lesson,” and Participant H added that it gave Jzan a measure of justice when “companies cut ties” with Sam Morales. Lastly, Participant G said that it somehow did not allow the cancelled person a platform to influence the perception or decision of social media followers. The respondent said that “if she [Morales] grew bigger than she already was and then a lot of people nuon will blindly follow her.”

For the disadvantages, participants A and F said that some people went beyond the issue to the point of “invading privacy” and “committing ad hominem.” Participant D said that people only “follow the side of the story of the one who called out,” with participant C adding that it came to the point of “public shaming.” Meanwhile, participant E said that along with its perceived advantages, cancel culture cultivated an atmosphere of hatred towards the perpetrator. Participant H said that it brought about discrimination, especially against those who disagreed with the call-out. Participants G and E added that it distressed some audiences as well. Lastly, participants B and G said that they saw no disadvantages in this particular issue.

When asked about the positive consequences of the hashtag itself, five participants said that it brought awareness for various reasons. Participant B recalled the LGBTQ+ community’s vulnerability to catfishing. Participants A, D, and F said they were informed about Sam Morales’s homophobia. Participant C said that the hashtag made people learn about the gravity of catfishing without experiencing it. Participant G said that through the hashtag, one could pinpoint which establishments were worth supporting

as some of them brought up the issue despite not being involved. “You could see nga dira ra mo mo support kay naa man silay good stand” [You could see where to support since they have a good stand]. She also said that it generated an online discussion where people shared their opinions about the issue. Participant E added that it was also an outlet to educate those outside the community who did not know that they were already doing something offensive to members of the LGBTQ+ community. Lastly, Participant E said that the hashtag ignited a sense of responsibility among the members to support each other. The participant said, “I think that’s very beautiful for our community kasi sino ba yung magtutulungan kung ‘di tayoyayo lang because we are a minority, right?” [I think that’s very beautiful for our community because who else would be helping out but ourselves since we are a minority, right?].

For the negative consequences, four participants said that the hashtag’s use somehow got out of hand. Participants A, B, and G said that with the “tendency of people to bandwagon,” opinions became “toxic” and “uncritical.” Participant F added that “people just participated in the trend without knowing the whole story behind it.” Participants D and E mentioned that offensive memes and nude photos were also used by some to either support or go against the cause of the hashtag. Participant D said, “the guy used as catfish during that time, nayaga-yagaan siya on social media” [he was made fun of on social media]. I saw memes of him, and nudes of him were shared too.” Participant E said “it was just awful that the victim had to become like a meme at some point,” adding that it contributed to widespread homophobia and transphobia against the community. “If that was a thing that happened to me, I wouldn’t go...out of my way to call out people in public. I would just deal with it privately,” he added. Lastly, participant C said that the hashtag cultivated a culture of hatred when it could have promoted awareness instead. “I still believe that the person should be held accountable, but not to the extent that people would be flocking to hate that person,” he said.

When asked about the online impact of the issue on the LGBTQ+ community, participants B and D said that it amplified the LGBTQ+ community’s call for equality. They said that although they belonged to the minority, they were still humans and that they could be victims of catfishing too. Participant F also raised the issue of bullying and that it should stop, for it was the main reason for the perpetrator’s catfishing members of the LGBTQ+ community in the first place. Participants A and H said that the issue ignited a sense of unity, “bringing the community closer in the digital space” as they continued to fight for their place in society. Participant G said that it showed who the online allies of the community were. Participant E

said that it lent a “stronger power” to not support someone’s business. In particular, the participant said,

Before previous cancel parties, the person supposed to be cancelled doesn’t really get cancelled; the person gets cancelled for a week. But in this case with Sam Morales now that it became a known issue, the next cancel parties were much...stronger than that, *kasi* [because] Sam Morales is not getting any projects, so I heard.

Lastly, Participant C said that the issue made the community members more careful when using social media.

Finally, when asked about the value of cancel culture in their personal lives, only two participants responded positively, saying that it was for public awareness. Participant A said that it “educated” people on the gravity of certain issues, while Participant D said that it was a way to be updated with what is happening since “we are so busy with our lives.” Four more were still weighing the value of cancel culture in their lives. According to Participant G, it usually only presented a “specific opinion that is publicly accepted” especially on Twitter. Participant F said that this “power” came with great responsibility to “research” on an issue before participating in the trend. Participant H added that although it was valuable in raising certain issues, it could eventually lead to “witch hunts” and “describing someone as guilty without solid evidence,” which was why he advocated for “accountability-culture” instead. Participant E said that it was personally conflicting. “I agree that cancel culture can let’s say...mawalan ng work [lose one’s job]? But at the same time it’s just...there’s just a lot of ways to handle it in a better way.” The participant added that in the end cancel culture was a way of publicly saying that someone should not be supported. Lastly, participants A and C said that cancel culture had no value in their personal lives, saying that they had their “own ways of calling out people,” and apart from giving support to other LGBTQ+ individuals, they participated in it simply to promote awareness on issues concerning the community. “I don’t like to meddle in other people’s affairs, but I do participate in sharing stuff just to promote awareness and to lessen the probability of it happening to others,” participant C said.

Empowerment Theory says that collective power and effort are directed towards achieving a desired outcome. In this case, even if only three participants were victims of catfishing like Jzan, the others participated in the hashtag movement in order to raise awareness that catfishing can also happen to the minority. They also called for accountability for what happened to the victims from the LGBTQ+ community. The study found

out that rather than looking into personal benefits, the respondents' reason for participation was to empower one another for the benefit of their community.

While the participants acknowledged the perceived benefits of cancel culture to their community, they also recognized its dangers and its adverse effects on them and their struggles as a minority group. As described by Jenkins (2006b), the convergence of media transforms consumers from mere receivers of messages to producers of messages as well. In this case, along with the calls to demand justice and promote awareness, there was a wave of homophobia and transphobia from heterosexuals who likewise participated in the trend. This is similar to what Nguyen (2020) has found in his study, that cancel culture intensifies the prevalence of negative posts on Twitter. In this case, a culture of hatred was cultivated not only towards the perpetrator, but towards the victim as well.

The article by Jesse Fox and Katie Warber (2015) revealed that LGBTQ+ members who were "out" did a "spiral of silencing" using social media site features such as friending, grouping, blocking, and unfriending to empower their minority group and silence the dominant group. In this study, three participants openly stated that as much as the hashtag achieved its aim to cancel Sam Morales, they would rather handle things privately if it were up to them. In connection to Fox and Warber's findings, this could mean that on a personal level, some members of the community preferred to empower themselves in their own private spheres. This, however, did not lessen their support for those LGBTQ+ members who spoke out in the online public sphere. They supported those who would call out the perpetrators, joined in the calling for accountability and equality, and promoted awareness about the continuing struggles of the community, but they did not publicly share their personal issues because they would rather settle them privately.

Mayberry (2012) posits that every individual takes on different forms and different levels of empowerment. In a sense, people are empowered relative to their own contexts. Thus, despite personal matters being settled privately, the participants were able to break the Spiral of Silence and demonstrated a form of empowerment at the individual level.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis above, the researchers propose a new definition of cancel culture: it is an online phenomenon where a group of persons condemn offensive and displeasing acts, beliefs, or certain stigmas in an attempt to demand accountability. It is done by attacking the offender's platform, participating in calls for withdrawal of support (e.g. "Is Over Party" hashtags), and sending threatening messages.

Twitter is found to be the most convenient platform to participate in cancel culture due to its social media features and algorithm. Through retweets and the use of hashtags, LGBTQ+ participants were able to show support for the victims despite their personal choice to deal with their own matters privately. This act supports the Convergence Culture Theory in that the line between consumer and producer in media has been blurred, thus, opening conversations and gathering varied perspectives on relevant issues (including through cross-app message consumption). The researchers identified three main factors that motivated the LGBTQ+ catfishing victims to speak out and participate in cancel culture: 1) relatability – catfishing victims can relate to the consequences, 2) raising awareness – the catfishing scheme exposed the LGBTQ+ community's ongoing struggles, and 3) reason for catfishing – Sam Morales's act of revenge against her past LGBTQ+ bullies. Hence, platforms like Twitter challenge the claim of the Spiral of Silence Theory because victims, especially those from minority groups, now have an avenue to share their experiences and get support from their community through hashtags, shares, likes, comments, and retweets.

The LGBTQ+ participants enumerated advantages and disadvantages of cancel culture and the positive and negative consequences of the hashtag itself. They agreed that cancel culture does not only promote awareness and call out perpetrators but also educate people who lack an understanding of their struggles as a community, hence validating the Empowerment Theory. However, they also recognized that this phenomenon could become toxic by cultivating hatred towards the perpetrator to the extent of invading their privacy, shaming them publicly, and stripping them of social roles and the social platform to influence. Mostly, hatred is diverted back towards the LGBTQ+ community through the spread of homophobia and transphobia, which misses the whole point of the movement. Thus, cancel culture plays a significant role in amplifying the voice of the LGBTQ+ community by empowering them in the online sphere, but only if it is handled carefully and critically.

For future studies, the researchers recommend using Mark Orbe's Co-cultural Theory, a framework designed to provide insight into the communication behaviors of individuals with little societal power such as people of color, women, persons with disabilities, and the LGBTQ+ community.

In-depth interviews with victims in other catfishing cases would provide further insight into the first-hand experiences of victims, thus giving a deeper understanding of the phenomena. The researchers also suggest that future studies be anchored on other cancel-culture movements that concern other minority groups such as people of color, indigenous groups,

persons with disabilities, women, and children to further understand the role of cancel-culture in spreading awareness about injustices committed against members of marginalized groups.

Moreover, the researchers would like future scholars to test the proposed definition of cancel culture in this study to know whether this definition remains the same for other cancel-culture movements. It can also help to determine whether the phenomenon of cancel-culture is still being used for the same purpose. The researchers hope that academic literature about how cancel-culture is being used to mobilize people and raise awareness against certain causes will emerge.

Lastly, the researchers suggest that future studies would look into the impact of cancel culture on individuals being cancelled, whether it negatively affects them (e.g., losing their job), or makes them more popular (via attention from the publicity); and whether its effect differs if an individual is more established or not.

Overall, cancel culture is an online phenomenon that gives victims, minorities, and other oppressed groups the power to call out offensive acts that otherwise would have been suppressed without these new media platforms. In the #SamMoralesIsOver issue, many of the LGBTQ+ catfishing victims and members of the same community, including the participants in this study, are empowered in different ways, particularly on the individual levels, to expose perpetrators and share their experiences to raise awareness. Ultimately, they gain online allies in their quest for solidarity and accountability.

References

- Cantrell, R. N. (2016). Convergence culture and competing literacy sponsors in post-Arab spring movements. (Order No. 10163085, Texas A&M University - Commerce). *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, 130. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1830500571?accountid=204903>
- Creswell, J.W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among the five approaches*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Croucher, S.M., & Cronn-Mills, D. (2018). *Understanding communication research methods: A theoretical and practical approach* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315167664>
- Conger, J., & Kanungo, R. (1988). The empowerment process: Integrating theory and practice. *The Academy of Management Review*, 13(3), 471-482. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/258093>
- Fox, J., & Warber, K. M. (2015). Queer identity management and political self-expression on social networking sites: A co-cultural approach to the spiral of silence. *Journal of Communication*, 65(1), 79-100. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12137>
- Garcia, C. E. (2020, March 31). Celebrities, netizens criticize Sam Morales over alleged catfishing stories. *GMA Entertainment*. <https://www.gmanetwork.com/entertainment/showbiznews/news/61289/celebrities-netizens-criticize-sam-morales-over-alleged-catfishing-stories/story>
- Griffin, E. A. (Ed.). (2008). Spiral of silence of Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. In *A first look at communication theory* (7th ed., pp. 372-382). McGraw-Hill Higher Education.
- Jenkins, H. (2006a). Democratizing television? the politics of participation. In E. Cheney & C. Man (Ed.), *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide* (pp. 240-260). New York University Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2006b). Introduction: "Worship at the altar of convergence": A new paradigm for understanding media change. In *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide* (pp. 1-24). New York University Press.
- Koo, G. H. (2019). The silence breakers: Understanding social, psychological, and contextual factors that influenced the development of the #MeTooMovement Based on Spiral of Silence Theory. (Order No. 13899066, Indiana University). *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, 86. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2283448642?accountid=204903>
- Lester, S. (1999). An introduction to phenomenological research. In *Culture critique: The power of cancel culture*. (2019, Mar 28). UniversityWire. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2198661547?accountid=204903>
- Luu, C. (2019, December 18). *Cancel culture is chaotic good*. JSTOR Daily. <https://daily.jstor.org/cancel-culture-is-chaotic-good/>
- Marwah, E. V. (2015, November 6). Understanding how young people experience risk with online-to-offline sexual encounters: A second qualitative phase for the CH@T Project. *Scholar Commons*. <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=7184&context=etd>
- Mayberry, M. (2013). Gay-straight alliances: Youth empowerment and working toward reducing stigma of LGBT Youth. *Humanity and Society*, 37(1), 35-54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0160597612454358>
- Mielczarek, N. (2018). The "pepper-spraying cop" icon and its internet memes: Social justice and public shaming through rhetorical transformation in digital culture. *Visual Communication Quarterly*, 25, 67-81.

- Nguyen, B. (2020). Cancel culture on Twitter: The effects of information source and messaging on post shareability and perceptions of corporate greenwashing. *Wharton Research Scholars*. 197. https://repository.upenn.edu/wharton_research_scholars/197
- Perkins, D. & Zimmerman, M. (1995). Empowerment theory, research, and application. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23, 569-579. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02506982>.
- People call for boycott of filmmaker Sam Morales after alleged catfishing of trans woman. (2020, March 31). *Rappler*. <https://www.rappler.com/entertainment/people-call-boycott-filmmaker-sam-morales-after-alleged-catfishing-scheme>
- Stahl, K. L. (2017). Crisis on *Castle*: Examining the communicative constitutive of fandom within convergence culture. (Order No. 10685482, Villanova University). *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, 54. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2037173437?accountid=204903>
- Velasco, J. C. (2020). You are cancelled: Virtual collective consciousness and the emergence of cancel culture as ideological purging. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, Special Conference Issue, 12(5), 1-7. <http://rupkatha.com/V12/n5/rioc1s21n2.pdf>

Grant Support Details

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, Cañal, B., Capuyan, I., del Pilar, H., Enolpe, M., and Loseo, S.; methodology, Cañal, B., Capuyan, I., del Pilar, H., Enolpe, M., and Loseo, S.; investigation, Cañal, B., Capuyan, I., del Pilar, H., Enolpe, M., and Loseo, S.; data curation, Cañal, B., Capuyan, I., del Pilar, H., Enolpe, M., and Loseo, S.; writing—original draft preparation, Cañal, B., Capuyan, I., del Pilar, H., Enolpe, M., and Loseo, S.; writing—review and editing, Cañal, B., Capuyan, I., del Pilar, H., Enolpe, M., and Loseo, S.; project administration, Cañal, B., Capuyan, I., del Pilar, H., Enolpe, M., and Loseo, S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The authors received no specific funding for this work.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank all the LGBTQ+ individuals that participated in the study for their time and commitment to share their experiences during the Focus Group Discussion. We acknowledge support from our advisor, Jeneth Borlasa, from the College of Communication Arts and Design.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

About the Authors

BONNE CHRISTINE O. CAÑAL is a third-year BA Communication student from the University of the Philippines Cebu. She is a freelance writer and the current Director for Projects and Events of IdeaLab UP Cebu. (corresponding author: bocanal@up.edu.ph)

IRA COZETTE C. CAPUYAN is a third-year BA Communication student from the University of the Philippines Cebu. She is a member of the University of the Philippines Students' Theater Arts Guild for Education (UPSTAGE), UP-Cebu's prominent theater organization. (corresponding author: iccapuyan@up.edu.ph)

HANNAH PAMELA M. DEL PILAR is a third-year BA Communication student from the University of the Philippines Cebu. She is currently living in Tacloban City, Leyte. (corresponding author: hmdelpilar@up.edu.ph)

MYRIL ELOISE S. ENOLPE is a third-year BA Communication student from the University of the Philippines Cebu. She is currently residing in Cebu City. (corresponding author: msenolpe@up.edu.ph)

SUSAN MAE P. LOSEO is a third-year BA Communication student from the University of the Philippines Cebu. She is the current chairperson of the University of the Philippines Sayaw Evolution (Sayaw-E), the official dance troupe of UP Cebu. (corresponding author: sploseo@up.edu.ph)

