



Dynamics of Online Firestorms and Cancel Culture: A Case Study of the Sock and Allah Controversy in Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of online firestorms and cancel culture, two phenomena that have become increasingly prominent in the digital age. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from media studies and sociology, it explores the causes, characteristics, and impacts of online firestorms within the context of cancel culture. Through a review of existing literature and relevant case studies, the paper seeks to deepen our understanding of how online discourse is shaped and mediated by digital platforms, and the implications of this discourse for individuals, organizations, and society as a whole. Specifically, this study investigates the phenomenon of cancel culture through the lens of the KK Mart sock and Allah controversy. Focusing on Facebook discussions (n=5401) across three major news portals *The Star*, *Sin Chew Daily* and *MalaysiaKini* and the resulting online firestorm, this study analyses to uncover the dynamics of public outrage, the mechanisms of digital mobilization, and the broader implications for businesses and societal norms. The analysis of social media interactions offers insights into how digital platforms shape public discourse and the consequences of cancel culture in a multicultural society such as Malaysia.

Keywords: Online firestorms, cancel culture, digital discourse, social media, public opinion, SDG 4: Quality Education, SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities, SDG 16: Peace Justice and Strong Institutions

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Introduction

In recent years, the rise of media platforms has transformed the dissemination and consumption of information, reshaping how individuals and communities engage, react and participate in public discourse. This development has also inadvertently led to the emergence of online firestorms and cancel culture, two pivotal phenomena that have garnered significant traction from scholars, policy makers and the public at large. Online firestorms refer to the rapid and widespread dissemination of information, often accompanied by intense emotional reactions. While online firestorms can take various forms and be triggered by a range of issues, “the consequences of the viral spread of public opinion and conduct are enormous, varying from disturbing the standard ways of living to mobilizing support for a cause, engaging in politics where necessary, and even sparking social movements” (Duan & Qutayan, 2024, p.149). The defining characteristic of an online firestorm lies in its capacity to capture public attention and generate substantial discourse within online communities. When associated with cancel culture, it often involves the public condemnation or boycott of individuals or organizations perceived to have acted inappropriately or unethically (Herhausen et al., 2019). As Dudenhoefer (2022) observes, “the one common theme everyone seems to agree on is that cancel culture involves taking a public stance against an individual or institution for actions considered objectionable or offensive” (para 2).

Viral content that reflects underlying social tensions or cultural norms frequently triggers strong reactions and sparks public debate. Such triggers often arise from contentious political issues or controversial statements and actions by public figures. Furthermore, the spread of viral content across various social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok or X can amplify the dissemination of information, leading to the formation of online firestorms and the mobilization of cancel culture movements.

Online firestorms and cancel culture share several key characteristics. These include the rapid, and mounting growth and spread of information driven by social media sharing (Nesi et al., 2018), which can generate exaggerated emotional reactions among users (Bramsen & Poder, 2014). Such reactions often result in the formation of distinct online groups in which individuals align themselves based on their views on the issue at hand. Moreover, both online firestorms and cancel culture can have a long-lasting effect, influencing public opinion,

shaping discourse, and even leading to real-world consequences for individuals or organizations involved (Kyriakou et al., 2023; Nkrumah, 2024).

The impacts of online firestorms and cancel culture can be consequential and far-reaching. These may include reputational damage, loss of trust, and even financial or legal repercussions (Gvozden & Zetterlind, 2023). At the societal level, online firestorms and cancel culture can influence public discourse, shape political debates, and impact the way information is disseminated and consumed. Additionally, these phenomena can have psychological effects on participants, leading to stress, anxiety, or other negative emotions (Picarella, 2024). Social media platforms play a central role in the emergence and dynamics of online firestorms and cancel culture (Eboly & Nilsson, 2024). These platforms provide a space for rapid and widespread dissemination of information, often without the gatekeeping mechanisms typical in traditional media. Algorithms can further amplify controversial content accelerating the formation of online firestorms and the mobilization of cancel culture movements (Eboly Ximenes Lopes & Nilsson, 2024). However, these same platforms also offer opportunities for individuals and organizations to respond to these phenomena, engage with their audiences, and manage their online reputation (Bramsen & Poder, 2014; Dudenhofer, 2020; Nesi et al., 2018; Picarella, 2024).

In simple terms, cancel culture refers to the practice of withdrawing support from individuals or organisations accused of questionable behavior. Today, social media has become a platform where individual discussions can fast move to aggressive serves as a space where individual discussions can quickly escalate into aggressive disagreements, potentially resulting in job loss or boycotts of companies (Dholika, 2020). According to Basaruddin (2024) this phenomenon has become a frequent topic of discussion among social media users, often involves a targeted boycott or ostracism of individuals or organisations perceived to exhibit problematic behaviour. It typically focuses on those who hold positions of power and influence such as celebrities, influencers, religious leaders and or politicians (Suhaimi & Sulaiman, 2013).

The existence of cancel culture presents both positive and negative outcomes. Many users feel entitled to express opinions freely on social media under the banner of freedom of expression, often disregarding the emotional impact on those being criticized. This culture shapes public discourse and social dynamics, influencing public perception and

career opportunities. While cancel culture may promote accountability, it also raises concerns about excessive punishment and mob mentality. It highlights the role of social media in amplifying collective outrage and blurring the lines between constructive criticism and online harassment (Bermas & Mabulay 2023).

This research report examines the phenomenon of cancel culture in Malaysia. As a multicultural nation with a complex tapestry of cultures and customs, Malaysia has not been immune to the effects of cancel culture. The growth of social media platforms has provided fertile ground for the rapid spread of information and opinions, often resulting in incidents of public shaming and ostracization. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the role of media agenda-setting in shaping public discourse, with particular focus on how the dissemination of information related to religious issues in Malaysia generates controversy and provokes strong reactions from multiple sector of society.

Cancel culture has become increasingly prevalent in Malaysia in recent years, particularly following the escalation of the Israel-Palestine conflict, which sparked numerous boycott movements (Ahmad Tajudin et al., 2025). Often, individuals participate in these boycotts without fully understanding their underlying motivations; their actions are largely influenced by the media's extensive promotion and framing of these movements, prompting many to join unconsciously. Through this study, the researcher aims to raise awareness of how media agenda settings influence public participation in cancel culture. As a result, individuals may learn to reduce their dependence on media narratives and develop more independent critical judgement. Even members of a minority groups may feel encouraged to voice their opinions confidently.

This phenomenon underscores the importance of our research objective, to examine how media agenda setting contributes to the escalation or de-escalation of the culture of disappointment surrounding religious issues in Malaysia (Valenzuela & McCombs, 2014). By applying the agenda-setting framework and analyzing how it within the context of recent boycotts, this study aims to generate meaningful insights into the dynamics of Malaysia's boycott culture and its implications for social cohesion. It also seeks to explore the role of the media in shaping public perceptions of religious problems.

A notable example is the KK Mart incident which triggered widespread calls for a boycott of the convenient store chain on social media and provoked intense public anger (New Straits Times, 2024).

Consequently, this study seeks to address two central concerns: (1) media's role in shaping public debate on religious issues in Malaysia, and (2) its impact on the persistence of evolution of cancel culture within the country.

The emergence and impact of “cancel culture” in Malaysia (Zamari, 2022), particularly in the context of social media activism and public accountability highlights how non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have utilised social media campaigns to mobilise support for causes, such as the Palestinian issue, using hashtags like #koyakIsrael where this phenomenon played out in Malaysia, in the backlash faced by TVAlhijrah for featuring a controversial guest on its talk show and emphasises that while cancel culture can be a powerful tool for holding individuals and institutions accountable, it also has drawbacks, such as potential cyberbullying and psychological harm to the targeted parties (Anisa et al., 2023).

Velasco (2020) stated that the evolution and impact of social media, from facilitating online interactions to shaping contemporary participatory cultures and social have given rise to cancel culture in digital spaces, where public figures are publicly shamed online for violating social norms. While cancel culture challenges public discourse, it also promotes censorship and intolerance of dissent, potentially stifling open debate. It calls for a shift toward constructive criticism that focuses on actions rather than individuals and on addressing the pervasive nature of cancellation itself. Meanwhile, Norris (2021) examined that the notion of a “cancel culture” has become a contentious issue, particularly among right-wing figures who argue that it suppresses dissent and intellectual diversity, especially on college campuses. Although some dismiss these claims as politically motivated, a deeper examination reveals a more complex reality.

The KK Mart “Allah” Socks Controversy

The controversy began when socks bearing the name “Allah” were discovered being sold at KK Mart convenience store, sparking outrage among Muslims. The uproar started on March 13 after images of the socks circulated on social media, prompting widespread anger leading the the UMNO Youth League to call for a nationwide boycott of the KK Mart stores (Khatirasen, 2024). KK Mart – Malaysia's second-largest chain of convenience store chain faced intense backlash, accusations, and public scrutiny following the incident (Hassan, 2024). Photos of the socks spread rapidly online, inciting anger among Muslims

who considered them deeply disrespectful, especially since the items appeared during the holy month of Ramadan. The chain's founder, Chai Kee Kan and his wife, Loh Siew Mui, a company director, were later charged for hurting religious feeling because it sold socks (Al Jazeera, 2024). KK Mart issued public apology, explaining that the socks were supplied from a vendor who did not recognize the religious significance of the word. However, many Netizens' expressed dissatisfaction with the company's response, with some calling for a boycott of the store. Religion remains a sensitive issue in Malaysia, where about two-thirds of the population are Malay Muslim, alongside large minorities of ethnic Chinese and Indian origin (Al Jazeera, 2024).

The influence of social media on cancel culture

Before the emergence of new media, ordinary citizen had little influence to initiate a "cancellation," as their means of disseminating information were limited to word-of-mouth (Demsar, 2023). However, the emergence of the Internet and social media has disrupted the status quo and allowed any individual to influence each other and expand our social networks (Allen, 2019). Moreover, it is the best place where people practise their right to freedom of expression. This accessibility has made it easier for people to voice out any issue on social media and seek reassurance and like-minded people to satisfy their self-righteousness (Zucker, 2021). With that in mind, social media has made it easier for individuals to gather people and draws attention enough to cancel others. Besides, social media algorithms prioritise content that aligns with its users' preferences and beliefs (Flaxman et al., 2016). Such circumstances will create echo chambers whereby like-minded people gather each other's opinions and perspectives, increasing the coverage of the cancel culture incidents and may even polarise online communities (Cinelli et al., 2021).

Boycott, cancel culture and call out culture

The distinction between "cancel," "call out," and boycott is significant. A boycott involves urging consumers to refrain from certain purchases (Friedman, 1999), whereas cancel culture entails the public denunciation and ostracism of individuals for perceived transgressions. In contrast, "call out" typically refers to interpersonal confrontations on social media (Matei, 2019). Call out culture generally emphasizes education and growth, while cancel culture often seeks punishment and denies possibility of redemption. In the KK Mart socks controversy,

Malaysian politician Muhamad Akmal Saleh called for a boycott despite the company's swift apology and action. Differentiating among boycott, cancellation, and call out is crucial, as each produces distinct social and economic consequences. In this case, both a call out and boycott were unnecessary since KK Mart had already issued public apology and faced legal repercussions. Furthermore, a complete cancellation of the chain could have worsened unemployment.

Theoretical Framework

The Agenda Setting Theory, which was first introduced in 1972 by McCombs and Shaw asserts that the public's view of the topics that are significant or prominent in society is greatly influenced by the media. According to McCombs and Shaw (1972), the media may not always be successful in telling individuals what to think, but it is remarkably good at telling individuals what to think about. The media has a significant influence on how politics are shaped by the amount of information in a news story and its position to determine the importance of specific issues. This research paper will discuss how the three types of agenda setting which is public agenda setting, media agenda setting, and policy agenda setting are applied to the recent KK Mart boycott incident.

According to Albalawi and Sixsmith (2015), public agenda setting refers to the process through which issues of significance gain prominence in the public sphere. It involves the collective efforts of citizens to draw attention to specific problems, shape public perceptions, and impact policy decisions. In response to the KK Mart controversy involving the name of socks bearing the name "Allah," a group of concerned Malaysians from diverse backgrounds, including academics, activists, and politicians, issued a statement expressing their acceptance of the company's public apology ("Concerned Malaysians' accept KK Mart's apology, reject boycott," 2024). They rejected United Malays National Organization's (UMNO) call for and instead advocated for reconciliation and mutual understanding. Their response played a key role in shaping public discourse surrounding the incident. (McCombs, 2001; McCombs, 2002; McCombs, & Shaw, 1972).

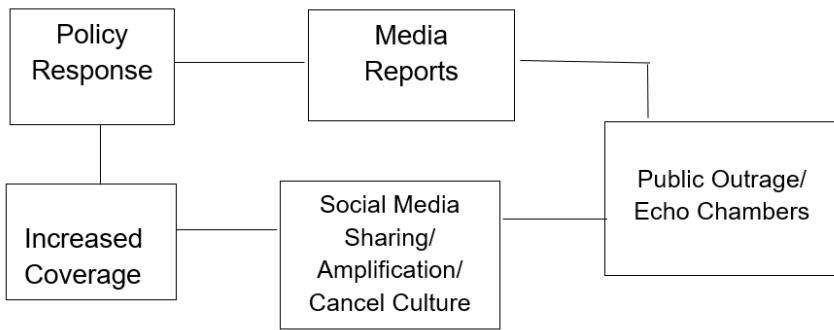
Furthermore, media agenda setting refers to the process by which traditional media organisations determine which issues to highlight, thereby influencing how the public perceives their importance. This involves the deliberate editorial decisions by journalists and media outlets which topics receive more coverage than others. The extensive

media coverage of the KK Mart dispute significantly influenced the public perception of the boycott issue. News reports and stakeholder interviews provided a platform for multiple perspectives, while the framing of the incident, including the initial revelation of the “Allah” socks, UMNO’s boycott call, and KK Mart’s apology helped shape how the public interpreted and responded to the controversy (McCombs, 2001; McCombs, 2002; McCombs, & Shaw, 1972).

Policy agenda setting meanwhile is the process by which official organisations or governments decide which topics are significant and worthy for discussion. It involves developing strategies and policies to deal with urgent societal issues and problems (McCombs, 2001; McCombs, 2002; McCombs, & Shaw, 1972). In response to the KK Mart boycott incident, the government released statements and took administrative and policy-related actions to resolve the problem. According to Chanel News Asia (2024), the Deputy Home Minister Shamsul Anuar Nasarah and the Minister for Religious Affairs Mohd Na’im Mokhtar stated the needs for inquiries, potential legal consequences, and appeals for calmness to the public. These statements emphasize the incident’s importance on the policy agenda and necessity of handling it within the realm of governance and the law (Astro Awani, 2024). This demonstrates that through the lens of agenda-setting theory, the media can amplify accusations, intensify public outrage and fuel calls for boycotts. The agenda-setting process not only shapes what issues are communicated but also legitimizes efforts by individuals and groups to reject or “cancel” cultures associated with the incidents that align with dominant media narrative. In this way cancel culture reflects the dynamic power of media to influence public perception and social behavior. The media transforms individual discontent into collective action by providing a megaphone to personal narratives. In this study, the first reports about the socks with “Allah” were modest, but media amplification triggered massive emotional responses. Through emotional framing and selective emphasis (KK Mart’s apology, religious sensitivity, political responses), the media helped form communities of like-minded individuals, reinforcing calls to “cancel” and boycott and there is a feedback loop where the media reports on the issue and this creates public outrage, it is then shared on social media which increases coverage and inadvertently has some effect on policy response. This cyclic reinforcement is key in both sustaining and escalating cancel culture movements. This is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1:

The Cyclical Nature of Media Reporting and Public Reaction



Simultaneously, it can be noted that agenda-setting and priming are interrelated media theories, with priming often seen as an extension of agenda-setting (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Agenda-setting refers to the notion that the emphasis placed on issues by the mass media significantly correlates with the perceived importance of these issues among the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). As Cohen (1963) famously stated, the media “may not be successful in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (p. 13). On the other hand, priming involves changes in the standards people use to evaluate events or actors. It suggests that news content influences audiences by highlighting particular issues as the key benchmarks for judgment. In essence, by making certain issues more salient through agenda-setting, the media can shape the cognitive framework individuals use when forming opinions. Domke et al. (1998) argue that media content activates relevant memories, which then serve as the basis for evaluating new information.

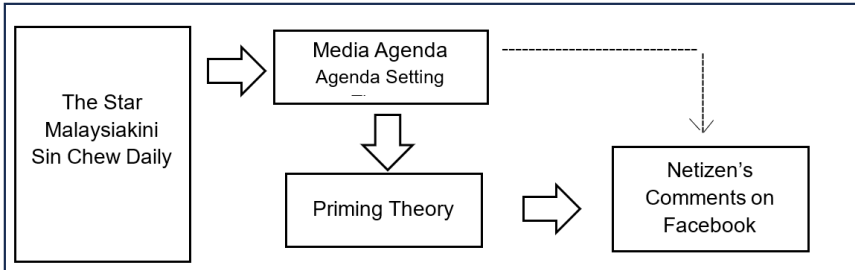
Both theories are useful in analysing the phenomenon of cancel culture in Malaysia [see Figure 2], particularly in the context of the KK Mart incident. When news reports repeatedly highlight the issue, especially on platforms like Facebook, they contribute to shaping the media agenda. This, in turn, influences public discussion and frames how people respond to the issue. The prominence of this story in news coverage primes audiences to evaluate not only the business involved but also broader societal concerns such as religious sensitivity, respect for

Islamic values, and national unity. In Malaysia’s multi-ethnic and multi-religious context, where Islam holds official status and religious harmony is a cultural priority, such incidents can trigger strong emotional and political responses. Consequently, cancel culture becomes a reflection of collective moral judgment shaped by media framing (Ramadhanty et al., 2024).

Moreover, negative media narratives may also prime individuals to associate such incidents with deeper societal tensions, including racial or religious sensitivities. While agenda-setting guides what people consider important, priming reinforces how they judge the issue — in this case, interpreting the KK Mart controversy through lenses of cultural respect, religious reverence, or even interethnic distrust. Thus, priming can be seen as a stronger cognitive effect than agenda-setting, as it not only directs attention but also helps form attitudes and evaluations toward cancel culture within Malaysia’s socio-cultural framework.

Figure 2:

Conceptual Framework



Methodology

A qualitative content analysis is used to examine Facebook comments of news portals that covered this controversy. Following the initial report, data was collected from the comment section of three Malaysian news portals over a one-month period. The analysis of the data focuses on identifying recurring themes, sentiments, and the progression of the online firestorm chats.

Based on the research questions and objectives the research seeks to explore how the media’s agenda-setting process defines and disseminates information about religious concerns in Malaysia. The study examines the content and framing of media coverage to identify

patterns and trends in the portrayal of religious themes. It also explores, the study explores the agenda-setting effects that contribute to either the escalation or de-escalation of cancel culture in situations involving religious sensitivities. By analyzing how media framing influences public perceptions and responses, the study aims to shed light on how agenda-setting operates within the context of Malaysia’s cancel culture. The study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of representation in the media, agenda-setting, and cancel culture in Malaysia’s social and cultural surroundings.

According to Adqrate’s official website AdQrate. (n.d.). one of the world’s first programmatic advertising platforms and provides data on media reach states that *The Star* is the leading English daily newspaper with a circulation of 248,559, *Sin Chew Daily* has a circulation of 251,000, and *MalaysiaKini* is the most visited Malay newspaper site with a circulation of 100,000. These newspapers have consistently held top readership positions throughout Malaysia’s history. Analysing *MalaysiaKini* alongside *The Star* and *Sin Chew Daily* provides a comprehensive view of the KK Mart’s representation across different ethnic and linguistic groups in Malaysia. The three newspapers Facebook pages from March 2023 to April 2023 were analysed. A coding sheet is employed to categorize Facebook comments, focusing on the tone and slant used by various language newspapers, as well as the themes and issues frequently discussed by users.

In total, 57 news articles were analysed over the three months (*The Star*: 7 articles, *MalaysiaKini*: 6 articles, and *Sin Chew Daily*: 44 articles). The breakdown of articles is as follows:

Table 1.
Samples of Facebook Posts and Comments

Newspaper/ Facebook Posts & Comments	Total Posts	Total Comments
The Star	7	575
MalaysiaKini	9	3088
Sin Chew Daily	44	1738
Total	60	5401

Analysis and Discussion

Firestorms and Their Progression

The KK Mart issue exemplifies how an initial discussion can lead to a rapid escalation of an online firestorm. The controversy started with a few posts highlighting the incident, which were quickly picked up by news portals. The widespread sharing and commenting on these posts led to an exponential increase in public attention and outrage. At its peak, the firestorm saw a high volume of comments and shares, with many users calling for boycotts and tagging the retailer in their posts. This sustained pressure forced KK Mart to respond by issuing an apology and removing the product. However, the intensity of the firestorm meant that even after these actions were taken, negative comments and calls for further action persisted. This include the calls to 'boycott' or 'wind up.'

Motivations Behind Cancel Culture

A significant portion of Facebook comments expressed anger and disappointment over the perceived cultural disrespect and religious insensitivity towards a sacred symbol. The use of such religious imagery on socks—an everyday item associated with feet, which are often considered dirty or impure in many cultures—was seen as offensive. This would be akin to desecration, as it trivializes their religious symbols by placing them in an inappropriate context. Many Muslims in Malaysia also found the issue sensitive. In Islam, it is strictly prohibited to depict religious figures, which adds a layer of religious discomfort for Muslims when religious imagery of any kind is treated disrespectfully (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.) Thus, the issue resonated across the community, intensifying the outrage. Commenters emphasized the importance of cultural and religious sensitivity, particularly in a diverse society like Malaysia. This motivation aligns with the broader trend in cancel culture, where communities seek to protect their values and demand accountability from those who violate them.

23 years I have never shopped at kk mart ni..Jewish prices. its time KK Mar.. already23 years and you still dont understand sensitive religious issues” and “It looks like there are Muslims too..you dont need to enslave yourselves working for this company that makes fun of religion my dear brothers and sisters. (“Concerned

Malaysians’ accept KK Marts apology, reject boycott,” (2024)

At some points the commentators were also trying to play the race card as the KK Mart was owned by a Chinese owner.

The chinese are racists. They do not buy from a Malay shop. Now the time has arrived. We malaysia are being racists just like the chinese. We will only buy from the Malay shops. We won’t die. If don’t buy from chinese shops (Arf Abd, 2024).

Likewise, in many posts about KK Mart on *Sin Chew Daily*, it’s often found that users frequently link them to instances of racism. Some perceive the matter as “targeting Chinese individuals” since the owner of KK Mart is of Chinese race.

从正面的角度来看，其实这是一件好事！！让其他族群尤其是华人知道，睁大眼睛，在他们的骨子里是多么恨华人，不管你做什么只要逮到机会就会想方设法把事件闹大，让你“没命”，这就是饭桶青年团的使命！！ (Chiang, D. 2024, March 17)

[Think optimistically, this is a good thing. It lets the other ethnic groups, especially the Chinese, know how much hatred they have deep down inside toward the Chinese. No matter what you do, as long as they seize the opportunity to blow things out of proportion, making your life miserable. That is the mission of UMNO Youth (UMNO Youth is the youth wing of Malaysia’s grand old party the United Malays National Organisation.)]

On the other hand, many comments on *Sin Chew Daily* articles also attempt to associate the boycott of KK Mart with political manoeuvring aimed at stirring emotions among Malay voters to achieve certain political goals.

历史告诉我们，巫统青年团长为了上位，最喜欢用这卑鄙的极端宗教和种族煽动情绪来达成他们目的！ (Tan, T. K., 2024)

[History tells us that, in order to gain power, leaders of UMNO Youth often resort to despicable tactics such as extreme religious and racial incitement to manipulate emotions and achieve their goals!]

我只是看到某些人利用宗教来捞政治筹码，坦白说这种手段绝对低庄。(Fong, 2024)

[I just see some people using religion to gain political leverage, to be honest, this kind of tactic is absolutely despicable.]

Nevertheless, *MalaysiaKini* whose audience are predominantly Malay Muslim were for the boycott and called on others to join in the cause hence aiming at political manoeuvring aimed at stirring emotions among Malay voters to achieve certain political goals:

Boikot hingga Kiamat. Orang beragama Islam ada prinsip tidak hairan dipulau org kapir. Terbaik Dr Akmal. (Ariffin Othman Hussien, 2024, March 26).

[Boycott until the end of time. Muslims have principles, not worried about being ostracized by non-believers. Well done, Dr. Akmal.]

When a non Muslim Malay responded by trying to explain that it was not KK Mart's fault,

Dalam isu ini, saya rasa KK mart jadi mangsa sebab stokin adalah stoking konsainan, jadi tanggungjawab adalah di tangan pengedar dan pengurus QA. (Richard Ho, 2024).

[In this issue, I think KK Mart is the victim because the socks are consignment stock, so the responsibility lies with the distributor and the QA manager.]

To which other readers responded by stating that:

yg peliknya pasai apa gmbat tokong2 kamu x ada pulak kat stokin tu.. suratn atau kebetulan. (Saiful Akmal Ghazali, 2024).

[what's strange is why there are no pictures of your temples on those socks... fate or coincidence?]

Malaysia is a country with a diverse population, including Malays, Chinese, Indians, and indigenous peoples, practicing various religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Cultural respect is a vital aspect of maintaining harmony in such a society. By selling socks with images of religious wordings, KK Mart (or its suppliers) violated an important cultural norm of respect for other religions and traditions, sparking criticism from multiple communities. Businesses in Malaysia are expected to be sensitive to the cultural and religious backgrounds of their customers. In this case, the failure to recognize the significance of religious symbols on products led to accusations that KK Mart, and by extension, its suppliers, were being culturally insensitive. This incident serves as a reminder for businesses to be cautious and aware of cultural and religious taboos when selecting or selling products.

Call for Accountability

This is a demand for individuals, organizations, or institutions to take responsibility for their actions, particularly when those actions have negative consequences especially towards a particular race and religion. This demand often arises in situations where misconduct, failure, or negligence is suspected or proven, and it reflects the need for transparency, justice, and corrective measures. Key elements of a call for accountability includes holding individuals or groups accountable means identifying those responsible for a particular decision or action and ensuring they acknowledge their role. This often involves demanding that the responsible parties provide a clear and honest explanation of what happened, why it happened, and who was involved. A call for accountability often includes the expectation that appropriate actions will follow, such as rectifying the issue, issuing an apology, or facing legal or social consequences (e.g., resignations, sanctions). Beyond assigning blame, calls for accountability often seek systemic changes to prevent similar issues from occurring in the future. This can include reforms in policy, management, or behavior. Many comments demanded that KK

Mart be held accountable for the oversight. Even though apologies were made the readers still desired boycotting the mart.

“Once more oh my how stupid the Malays are bowing to seek apology” (Syahirul Aiman, 2024) [in reference to KK Mart staff who were Malay Muslims seeking apology from users] and in some instances, legal action “Arrest the owner Malaysian Police” (Zuma, 2024). This reflects a central aspect of cancel culture. the insistence that public figures and entities take responsibility for their actions and make amends for their mistakes, this can be seen in the comment.

All Parties had been told to stand down since the issue are in the hands of the Judiciary and why some still wanted to Molotov the stores until fatalities are involved and the collateral damages to other properties . Have they no respect for the Rules of Law in place? (Andrew C., 2024)

This differs from the comments on *Sin Chew Daily's* post, where some Chinese users pointed out that KK mart has held press conferences and offered sincere apologies, and therefore, the issue should be considered resolved. These posts primarily express an inability to accept the continued escalation of the issue despite the apologies.

商家已经很果断去道歉了，希望大家可以接受，别再追究了。(Kee, 2024)

[The business has already apologised decisively. Hopefully, everyone can accept it and stop pursuing the matter further.]

得寸进尺，当事人已经公开道歉，还不能了事，根本就是在欺压。马来西亚有这种人存在，永远都不可能进步。(Lee, 2024a)

[Taking advantage of the situation, the parties involved have already publicly apologised, yet it is still not enough. With people like this in Malaysia, progress will never be possible.]

But the Malay community seemed unhappy with the apology stating that it seemed insincere.

Begitu mudah ayat maaf diungkapkan..patutlah senang dipijak dan dihinjak (Zainal Abidin Abu, 2024, March 26)

The apology is so easily spoken... no wonder it's easy to be stepped on and humiliated.

The public demanded that KK Mart take responsibility for allowing such products to be sold. Even though the company later explained that the socks were consignment stock (provided by third-party suppliers), the controversy sparked conversations about ensuring businesses and their supply chains are culturally aware and responsible for the products they offer. Following the outrage, KK Mart likely faced pressure to issue an apology and take steps to remove the offending products. This resolution highlights how essential it is for companies to act swiftly and sensitively when religious or cultural boundaries are crossed

Dynamics of Public Outrage

Amplification through Social Media

The analysis revealed that social media played a crucial role in amplifying public outrage. Comments on Facebook quickly garnered likes, shares, and replies, creating a ripple effect that extended the reach and intensity of the initial outrage. This amplification is a hallmark of cancel culture, where digital platforms enable rapid and widespread dissemination of grievances. Many Chinese users have linked this to the manipulative tactic of politicians using social media to sway public opinion, which poses substantial implications for democratic countries like Malaysia. Inciting religious hatred can disrupt societal harmony, mislead people, and jeopardise national stability, particularly when amplified through social media channels.

社会风气被政客以网络带风向。宗教如果无限上纲，只会国家内斗。为了赢，招数可以无底限。劣币驱逐良币，最后看谁比较心狠手辣。政府不出手，政客就会极尽煽动宗教仇恨，国家将不得安宁。这时，国家被收割只是时间问题了。(Tey, A., 2024)

[The social atmosphere is being influenced by politicians through online platforms. If religion is constantly exaggerated, it will lead to chaos within the country.

In the pursuit of victory, there is no limit to the tactics used. In the end, it is a contest of who is more ruthless. If the government doesn't intervene, politicians will relentlessly stoke religious hatred, and the country will not find peace. At this point, it's only a matter of time before the country is harmed.]

In addition, economy and investments have emerged as the primary focus of discussions on Facebook. Many Chinese users express concerns that the boycott of KK Mart could undermine the confidence of foreign investors in establishing businesses in Malaysia and potentially lead to the closure of local enterprises.

又要下架了，又要亏大了，來投資先要分30%給人，然後分分鐘隨時還會得不償失的，所以有哪個會想要來投資？(Lee, 2024b)

[Now it has to be taken down again, and there will be huge losses again. To invest here, you first have to give 30% to others, and at any moment you might end up losing more than you gain. So which country would still want to invest?]

如此的營商環境，恐怕沒有外資要來了。(Yap K. F., 2024)

[With such a business environment, it is feared that no foreign capital will come.]

Other posts emphasise that boycott actions reflect a lack of understanding or awareness among the people about the potential economic consequences.

搞杯葛和抵制的国家，都是国民集体智慧低下的体现，因为每一个抵制和杯葛损害的永远都是自己国家的经济，你们杯葛是爽了一时，但以后日子也会因为经济受创而变得更苦。(Kelvin, 2024)

[Countries that engage in boycotts and protests reflect a collective lack of wisdom among their citizens because every boycott and protest ultimately damages their

own country's economy. While boycotting may bring temporary satisfaction, in the long run, economic damage will make life even harder.]

Meanwhile the Malay community seems to be enraged with the situation and lauded politicians on their bravery to stand up for the race and religion.

Orang melayu perlukan pemimpin yg berani seperti Dr Akmal untuk meneruskan perjuangan bangsa, agama dan tanah melayu yg tercinta. Kami akan sentiasa bersama pemimpin2 yg berani dan benar. Kami berdiri teguh dibelakang. (Mohd Zuki, 2024).

[The Malays need a courageous leader like Dr. Akmal to continue the struggle for the nation, religion, and beloved land of Malaysia. We will always stand with brave and righteous leaders. We stand firmly behind them.]

The above statement calls for a strong leadership and portrays a sense of urgency to protect and preserve specific cultural and national values. It underlines the importance of defending the interests of the Malay ethnic group, their religion (Islam), and their connection to the land. It is observed that there is a creation of a clear boundary between the group's identity and perceived threats, possibly from other ethnic or religious groups or external forces. The online community seem to beckon on a figure such as 'Dr Akmal' for bold and decisive action and to continue championing the cause for the community. The community also critic the current lax leadership and inefficient strategies which seem to handicap the Malay community. Such forceful and conviction led statements can heighten tensions between various groups. It reinforces a narrative of "*perjuangan*" (struggle for survival or rights), framing the issue as a defence of identity and heritage. This is an appeal for unity and collective action from the community, an assurance that those who follow the brave and just leaders will be supported, building a sense of solidarity and readiness for action that could morph into political movements or social conflict. What the statement calls for is strong, nationalistic leadership that can protect and advance the interests of the Malay people at a time when those interests are perceived to be under marginalization or threat.. This statement can potentially escalate

conflict if it resonates with others who feel similarly marginalized, fuelling group solidarity against perceived external threats.

Zaman dah terbalik, terlalu nak jaga bangsa lain sampai bangsa dan agama sendiri terbabai, teruskan Dr Akmal. (Mohd Azam, 2024).

The times have reversed, focusing too much on taking care of other races to the point that our own race and religion are neglected. Keep going, Dr. Akmal.

This statement reflects a sentiment of frustration and perceived injustice, particularly in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. The speaker feels that efforts to cater to the needs of other ethnic groups have resulted in the neglect of their own community's interests, especially concerning race ("*bangsa*") and religion ("*agama*"). In conflict situations, this kind of expression may indicate: A belief that one's own group (in this case, the Malay ethnic group and Islam) is being sidelined or deprived in favour of others. The statement also touches on sensitive issues of racial and religious identity, common in political or social conflict when people feel their cultural and religious heritage is under threat. The mention of Dr. Akmal, signals support for strong leadership to prioritize and defend their interests.

Polarization and Echo Chambers

The comments also highlighted a tendency towards polarization. While many users supported the calls for cancellation, others defended KK Mart, arguing that the pattern was unintentional and that the outrage was an overreaction. "As a Muslim, to forgive is a virtue especially in the holy month of Ramadan where piety is essence" (Suri Abdullah, 2024) and "Apparently this is a genuine mistake. Our Malay & Muslim friends are known for a forgiving ethnic. Why not on this incident?" (Ooi Thean Aik, 2024).

The first part of the quote ("As a Muslim, to forgive is a virtue especially in the holy month of Ramadan...") appeals to religious values of forgiveness and piety, which are significant in Islamic practice. The second part ("Apparently this is a genuine mistake. Our Malay & Muslim friends are known for a forgiving ethnic. Why not on this incident?") suggests that these values should apply to a specific situation but also implies frustration or surprise that forgiveness isn't being extended in this instance. Polarization can emerge from this when one group feels

their values (in this case, forgiveness within the Muslim community) are being challenged, either by outsiders or members of their own group. The second part may exacerbate this by implying that the expected behavior (forgiveness) isn't being followed, further intensifying divisions between groups that support or oppose forgiveness in this case. In an echo chamber, such a challenge can create cognitive dissonance or pushback, as it introduces a conflicting view. If the group strongly believes that forgiveness is essential, any reluctance to forgive in a real-world incident could lead to internal division or criticism of others who don't conform to the ideal.

Some readers of Sin Chew news commented on the true essence of God, advocating forgiveness and opposing extreme boycotts as a means of resolving issues.

神是宽容大量的，不会像你们心胸狭窄，大不了就复
制杯葛不要买咯，简单~ (Chaw C. H., 2024a)

[God is merciful and forgiving, unlike you who are so narrow-minded. If you don't like it, just boycott and don't buy it—it's that simple.]

每一个宗教的神都是神圣的！没有一个信徒可以接受他的神被轻蔑。然而每一个宗教的神都是一样，绝对不会以极端的手段来解决任何问题，不是吗？ (Chiang, D. 2024b)

[Every God in every religion is sacred! No believer can accept their God being mocked. However, every God in every religion is the same, never resorting to extreme measures to solve any problem, isn't that so?]

This dichotomy often led to heated debates, with little room for nuanced discussion. Social media's echo chamber effect, where users are exposed primarily to opinions that reinforce their own and this was evident in the clustering of like-minded comments such as "Boycott 100 percent at KK mart" and in response "Hopefully bankrupt forever hahhah boycott till the end" (*The Star*).

Discussion

KK Mart's response to the controversy, including an apology and the removal of the offending product, did not immediately quell the public backlash. The convenient store, as evidenced by the ongoing negative comments and calls for boycotts, faced significant reputational damage. This illuminates the lasting impact of cancel culture on businesses, where initial blunders can lead public backlash and prolonged economic consequences. The KK Mart issue highlights broader societal implications of cancel culture (Dudenhoefer '17, 2020). Firstly, it demonstrates the power of collective action in holding businesses accountable and promoting cultural sensitivity. On the reverse, it raises concerns about the potential for overreaction and the suppression of diverse viewpoints. The challenge lies in balancing the need for accountability with the promotion of open and inclusive discourse. Inclusivity, in this context, should not serve as a collective bargaining tool that leads to boycotts but rather as a national approach to understanding how incidents like this case study can rapidly escalate in a digital environment characterized by accountability, emotional intensity, and a lack of critical reasoning. While calls for accountability are essential, they must be tempered with a thoughtful consideration of context and intent. The distinction between genuine transgressions that warrant public condemnation and misunderstandings that could be addressed through dialogue is crucial for fostering a more inclusive online environment. The case should be a learning curve for any or all as the incident sparked not only calls for accountability but also reflections on cultural respect and religious sensitivity. Living in a time where the world is changing on numerous fronts, multiculturalism is at its peak with the diverse beliefs within the community, and therefore tolerance and harmonious living should be acknowledged and honoured. As mentioned by Bermas and Mabulay (2023) **not in references** social media interactions reveals that public outrage is often amplified by the viral nature of platforms like Facebook, where users can quickly share and react to content. This phenomenon underscores the critical role of social media algorithms in shaping public discourse, as they prioritize emotionally charged content that fosters division rather than dialogue. The motivations behind the outrage surrounding KK Mart's sale of socks bearing the name "Allah" highlight significant cultural sensitivities in Malaysia's multicultural society. However, the backlash against KK Mart also raises concerns about the potential for overreaction and the suppression of diverse perspectives. Moreover, this case exemplifies

how political manoeuvring can exploit cultural tensions, with various groups using social media to rally support for their agendas. The interplay between cancel culture and political dynamics complicates the discourse, as it often leads to polarization rather than constructive engagement. This polarization is particularly evident in the differing responses from various ethnic groups within Malaysia, reflecting broader societal fractures that need addressing. In terms of comment sentiment and volume, it was found that the emotional reactions were traceable to news articles' tone and headlines which users reinforced their views by engaging only with like-minded perspectives [echo-chambers]. It was also found that the comments often reflected political narratives (e.g., pro-Malay identity, anti-Chinese sentiment) that were indirectly shaped by the way media platforms framed the incident. The framing of the sock incident by various portals, especially *MalaysiaKini*, aligned with specific ethnic and religious sentiments. Headlines and editorial choices amplified certain narratives (e.g., “deliberate insult,” “calls for boycott,” “religious tension”), which increased the salience of the issue, encouraging public reaction. The agenda of the publication shaped the comment section discourse. *MalaysiaKini* showed higher support for boycott campaigns—reflecting its core readership's sensitivities while *Sin Chew Daily* highlighted backlash against Malay nationalist narratives, with readers expressing economic and multicultural concerns and *The Star* displayed a mix, often showing moderation and focusing on multicultural impact.

Conclusion

The KK Mart sock and ‘Allah’ controversy presents a good case study through which one could understand the dynamics and the impact of this new phenomenon of cancel culture. The paper therefore deliberates on Facebook comments in news portals and the ensuing online firestorm to show how social media amplifies public outrage and drives calls for cancellation vis a vis boycotts. While cancel culture may enforce social accountability and respect for culture, it runs the risk of fostering division and suppressing free expression. This, thus means that navigating the complications at a time when digital platforms are shaping public discourse calls for an approach with the view to balanced and inclusive societal dialogue. Agenda setting implies that the media selects what to be presented to the public and its ability to shape public perception (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). The action of “cancelling” may

start out small or just a “call-out” rather than a “cancel”, but as it attracts media attention, with news outlets and online publications reporting on the controversy and its implications, there might be a shift of attitude and attention from the public.

Agenda setting fuels the expansion of “cancelling”, regardless of public media’s non-bias policy. The media has a role to report issues to keep the public informed, in this context, a “cancel” action advocated by a citizen. Like-minded people gathered, forming a community to enhance the “cancellation” after reading the news, thus drawing more attention (Yap et al., 2022). As a result, it will be a loop where the media continues to emphasise the action, which provides coverage and further amplifies the issue, contributing to its status as a cancel culture incident. In conclusion, cancel culture is an essential aspect of society because it harnesses the power of the media to scrutinise the actions of those in power, individuals of influence, or every member of society. However, its effective implementation in today’s society is facilitated by the media operating in accordance with the patterns outlined in the agenda-setting theory. Undeniably, cancel culture can serve as an effective and long-term means of holding accountable those who have transgressed or organisations that are at fault. Nonetheless, it has become uncontrollable and has led to the invasion of individuals’ privacy by others, prompting senseless apologies and fostering lawlessness.

Cancel culture has become an inevitable aspect of contemporary society, however if individuals can assess situations independently and rationally rather than blindly following media narratives, this phenomenon can yield positive outcomes. While online firestorms and cancel culture pose challenges for individuals, organizations, and society at large, they also create opportunities for reflection, dialogue, and transformation (Jaishankar, 2023). This cultural dynamic can illuminate important social issues, raise awareness about social injustices, and mobilize communities toward positive action. Moreover, it can encourage individuals and organizations to reassess their communication strategies, engage more meaningfully with their audiences, and address the root causes of controversy.

Online firestorms and cancel culture are complex and multifaceted phenomena that reflect the evolving nature of digital discourse. By examining their causes, characteristics, and impacts of these phenomena, we can better navigate the digital landscape and harness the potential of social media to foster constructive engagement and positive social

change (Jaishankar, 2023). However, it is important to recognize the challenges posed by online firestorms and cancel culture, and to work towards creating a more inclusive and respectful online environment for all. In summary, this article calls for a balanced approach to navigating cancel culture, emphasising media literacy, empathy, and constructive dialogue to address systemic injustices while fostering a more inclusive and ethical online environment (Jaishankar, 2023).

In conclusion, the KK Mart incident encapsulates the complexities of cancel culture and online firestorms in contemporary society. While these phenomena have the potential to promote accountability and raise awareness of social injustices, they also pose risks of division and stifling free expression. As digital platforms continue to shape public discourse, it is imperative to cultivate media literacy among users to navigate these challenges effectively (Yu et al., 2024). The findings suggest that while cancel culture can serve as a tool for social change, it must be approached with caution. Encouraging open dialogue, empathy, and understanding is essential to mitigate the adverse effects of online firestorms. Future research should explore strategies for fostering constructive conversations that honor cultural sensitivities while promoting accountability (FasterCapital, n.d.). Ultimately, navigating the landscape of online discourse requires a commitment to balancing accountability with inclusivity. By fostering an environment where diverse voices are heard and respected, society can harness the power of digital platforms for positive change while minimizing the risks associated with cancel culture's more extreme manifestations.

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- social atmosphere is being influenced by politicians through online platforms. If religion is constantly exaggerated, it will lead to chaos within the country. In the pursuit of victory, there is no limit to the tactics used. In the end, it is a contest of who is more ruthless. If the government doesn't intervene, politicians will relentlessly stoke religious hatred, and the country will not find peace. At this point, it's only a matter of time before the country is harmed.] [Comment on Facebook post 巫青促挂道歉横幅- KK老板: 在讨论后续行动 [UMNO Youth calls for apology banners to be displayed; KK Mart owner says further actions are under discussion]. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/SinChewDaily/posts/pfbid0bm9cQuTFYadTtrT5kMw9XzF6of1PqeGPNUMFpvfy68ZrF8GKttjnskCvmQ7rsxRtl?comment_id=1656814915136819
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