

Political and Social Viewpoints of High School Students: How do Social Media Influencers, Cancel Culture, and Political Correctness affect these?

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Abstract. Social media usage, especially among young people, has become intertwined with daily life. High school students, who are heavily exposed to social media, are influenced by influencers, cancel culture, and political correctness. This study explored how these factors affect students' perspectives on political and social issues. A purposive sampling technique was used to amass 12 participants. Data gathering used the administration of semi-structured interviews, recording audio, and obtaining written responses. Thematic analysis was used in analyzing the transcription of the recordings from the interview. The findings revealed that political correctness significantly influences students' viewpoints, while influencers and cancel culture have a lesser impact. Participants emphasized the importance of research, personal growth, and maturity over cancel culture and influencers. Further research is needed, involving older participants and diverse settings, due to limited literature on this topic.

Keywords: Cancel culture; Political influence; Social media influence; Sociopolitical views.

1.0 Introduction

The Internet has become more intertwined with our daily lives even in socialization. This is why social media has nearly become inseparable from us human beings. Social Media consists of online platforms where people can not only share moments in their lives, but also their thoughts and opinions. These opinions however are also accompanied by opposing ideas from other people, but more so by social media influencers who not only have a large following, but also engage in complex roles such as being online opinion leaders (Balaban & Mustatea, 2019), where these people could heavily influence others along with their respective opinions. However, when the opinion of one differs from the majority group, that person is often shunned; creating the term and conception of what we call cancel culture.

Cancel culture has been a topic of extensive discourse on social media for numerous years, tracing its roots as far back as 2015 (Deol, 2022). The term "Cancel Culture" refers to as removal of support for a certain individual who has behaved in a manner deemed inappropriate or troublesome in the world of social media, entertainment, or consumerism (Mueller, 2021), or simply for having an opinion that is often deemed different to the opinion of majority groups, giving rise to political correctness. Political Correctness goes beyond just limiting what people can say. It encompasses a broader transformation in how individuals and groups are perceived, a shift in culture, and a change in the way on how meaning is constructed (Schwartz 2018). The development of both cancel culture and political correctness is alleged to have marginalized dissenters, curtailed academic independence, fostered conformism, and suffocated genuine intellectual debate (Norris 2020). The development of the two has also

exerted more pressure towards Americans to conceal their viewpoints as compared to the McCarthy era (Strossen 2020).

The influence of culture and political correctness on students' opinions can be rather complex, with the utilization of the former as a powerful tool that enables people to have control on their personal and social behaviours, beliefs, and principles (Burmah, 2021). These movements can encourage students to be more conscious of how their words and actions can affect others, promoting inclusivity and preventing the spread of harmful beliefs. However, for some students, cancel culture, and political correctness can feel like a form of censorship or an attempt to stifle their ability to express their thoughts and opinions freely. Sometimes, people feel anxious about expressing their thoughts or opinions because they are apprehensive about being criticized or ridiculed (Roth 2019). This study determined the extent to which social media influencers, cancel culture, and political correctness impact students' perspectives on political and social problems. This holds significance as it provides insight into the attitudes and beliefs held by upcoming generations of citizens and voters. Social Media has a significant role when it comes to influencing high school students, in particular, their viewpoints regarding politics and social issues. This study possesses significance as it helps in determining the degree of change in viewpoints brought upon by influencers. It also shows how cancel culture and political correctness can affect the viewpoint of high school students through reasons such as fear of being shunned by the public.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study aimed to analyze how social media influencers, cancel culture, and political correctness affect the political and social viewpoints of high school students. As such, this study utilized qualitative design, which allows exploration of a social phenomenon and to generate a hypothesis that is investigated qualitatively (Vandeweerd et al., 2018) and comprehend unique experiences that cannot be fully understood from a single perspective, presenting itself as a growing and multi-disciplinary field of study. Specifically, this study utilized case study as its research design. A case study thoroughly investigates and analyzes a specific instance or scenario, such as a person, organization, community, event, or situation (Hassan, 2023).

2.2 Research Participants

As this study has a target participant from a specific demographic, a purposive sampling technique was used to amass interviewees. Twelve (12) participants were interviewed for the study. Participants were chosen according to the following criteria; age, length of social media exposure, and information regarding the research's topic. The age of participants must fall between the range of 14 to 16 years old. The participants were also chosen according to their exposure to social media which is at least 5 hours of exposure. Lastly, the participants must have some idea regarding the topics discussed in the study.

2.3 Research Instrument

The researchers utilized semi-structured interviews. Documents and audio recordings served as additional information to substantiate the data collected during the interview process.

The research instrument consists of two parts. Part I of the research instrument consists of participant's demographic data. Part II of the research instrument consists of 3 guide questions for the interview. The instrument-guide questions were checked and validated by three experts composed of social science, language, and research teachers.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedures

Data gathering used the administration of semi-structured interviews, recording audio, and obtaining written responses. Each interview was conducted in school premises with each session lasting no more than 35 minutes. Participants were given an information missive containing the objectives of the study and were given time to review their study related privileges during the interviews. The data collected are examined to address the research queries and to identify the commonalities and distinctions among the individuals who participated in the study.

2.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used in analyzing the transcription of the recordings from the interview. Data triangulation and cross-checking was observed to secure the accuracy, reliability, and validity of the results.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

This research has been evaluated and ethically cleared by the Central Luzon State University (CLSU) Ethics Research Committee (ERC) with approval code 2023-166 on March 14, 2023. Informed consent and data privacy were secured prior to the conduct of onsite interviews.

3.0 Results and Discussion

Four themes emerged from analyzing the data:

Theme 1: Cancel Culture and Its Effects

Eminence of cancel culture has been highlighted by the results of this study among high school students in which an appreciable proportion acknowledged their vulnerability towards being canceled and illustrated concerns about its deleterious outcomes. Although a handful refused to be afraid, most either displayed ambiguity over whether their encounters fell into the category or recognized individuals who endured cancellation themselves. Considering verdicts on cancel culture, several pupils voiced disapproval citing harmful aftermaths accompanying it.

A high school student shared a similar view, stating that canceling someone who is being followed is not the right approach. According to the student, there are other means of educating such an individual and correcting their mistakes instead of outrightly bashing and insulting them publicly. A participant has stated *"I think it's not right to cancel a person just because you're following them, because there are other ways to educate them, and it's possible to correct their mistakes instead of bashing and insulting them like that."* This comment highlights one of the primary criticisms against cancel culture which involves public shaming. Canceling individuals without considering alternative measures for tackling problematic behavior may not be the most effective approach. A better strategy would be to provide education and information about the issue in question.

This is supported by the study conducted by Molochko & Hryniova(2022), where they stated that *"The attitude towards cancel culture in modern societies is rather ambiguous. The consequence of this is the appearance of supporters and critics of this phenomenon. Extending cancel culture to the political struggle carries certain risks associated with the need for excessive control over freedom of thought and speech. 'Cancellation' is used not only as a tool for manifesting a position on social media, but also becomes a tool in manipulative campaigns and information wars."*

Theme 2: Social Media Influencers and Their Impacts

The results show that social media influencers have greatly affected high school students' political and social viewpoints. Some teenagers believe these influencers' opinions without question, while others approach controversial topics with hesitation. The impact of these influential figures extends beyond individual students, affecting the views of their peers as well. Students reported that they have become more informed about topics such as the LGBTQIA+ community since interactions became virtual due to the pandemic. One participant said, *"No, because I do my own research. I do have my own beliefs and principles, but I get their side, I understand their side, where they are coming from, and it makes me think more, think deeper, understand the situation, and know which side I will choose."*

According to an article written by Bareth (2023), *"Influencers' curated and edited content can create a distorted view of reality, leading young people to feel that they are not measuring up to their peers or to the idealized version of themselves that they see online."*

Theme 3: Political Correctness and Their Stand

Results show that some participants support political correctness as a means of fairness and equality. They believe that it is only right to enforce political correctness to enable inclusivity in situations where there is an apparent exclusion of minority groups. Others believe that it is appropriate to strive for political correctness most of the time but is inappropriate if it is done not for the inclusion of minority groups but instead for the profit and

avoidance of possible consequences for their company. However, some participants changed their opinions to appear politically correct due to peer influence. The influence of political correctness varied among participants.

One of the participants has expressed during the interview that *"I think if companies are being politically correct to include minority groups, then I think it's okay, but if they were only being politically correct for profit then no, I don't think it's right."* This is one of the few similar responses that expressed a division and uncertainty in political correctness.

The results which showed a division in opinions of the subjects regarding political correctness are backed by the study conducted by Yuwana & Cathrine (2021), where they have concluded that *"There are some problems that come from the idea of labelling people based on their identity which does not sit well for some people thus making people have a resistant attitude towards it. On the other hand, political correctness brings up some issues that are often overlooked by many people like marginalized people and minorities in American society"*.

Theme 4: Maturity and Education as a Factor

Some students have explicitly stated that maturity and education have a much larger influence on the changes in their opinion compared to cancel culture. They have stated that their opinions changed over time and have also been changed due to them becoming more aware regarding socio-political problems.

A participant have stated that *"Maturity for me is ranked higher in terms of its influence compared to cancel culture,"* further signifying that maturity has a larger effect compared to cancel culture.

4.0 Conclusion

The viewpoints of students were heavily affected by social media influencers and political correctness, but not so much by cancel culture. This is because the students also expressed growth and maturity as a more prevailing factor over cancel culture. The students when asked on which has affected their opinions more, they have stated that maturity has affected and altered their opinion more compared to cancel culture.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

To complete this research project, all authors contributed equally from the conceptualization to the publication of this study.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

The authors affirm that they do not have any competing interest.

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