

Decoding Cancel Culture Representation: A Semiotic Content Analysis of Korean Movies and Series

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ABSTRACT

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Cancel culture is a collective practice where individuals hold public figures accountable for actions or statements that violate social, cultural, ethical, or moral norms. In South Korea, this phenomenon has been long ingrained, amplified by active social media use and the spread of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) through K-pop, films, and dramas. The entertainment industry serves as a lens to explore how Korean society enforces ethical values, particularly through cancel culture. This study examines how cancel culture is portrayed in selected Korean films and dramas. Using a constructivist paradigm and a qualitative approach, the research applies Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis (denotation, connotation, and myth) to identify its representation. Findings reveal that the media significantly shapes public perception. Characters affected by cancel culture face severe personal and professional consequences, although rehabilitation depends on societal acceptance. Reflecting the reality of cancel culture in Korean society finds the involvement of influencers or public figures who are involved in scandals/rumors as the cause, resulting in negative comments and social condemnation that leads to career loss or social exclusion.

1. Introduction

The increasingly developing technological advances increase the emergence of globalization which has a major influence on the dynamics of everyday human life. The intertwining forces of social media and globalization have fundamentally reshaped societal interactions, such as the emergence of the internet in the digital world, which is useful for personal needs, the spread of news, entertainment, health, politics, and so on, creating a hyper-connected world where information spreads rapidly and cultural boundaries become unclear. This interconnectedness has given rise to a phenomenon known as "cancel culture," where individuals or groups face public shaming and ostracism for perceived transgressions. The shift in the way of communicating in the digital era has made social media a powerful tool that shapes trends, opinions, and behaviors. Social media platforms like Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram have become the main places for canceling culture. These platforms enable the rapid dissemination of information and facilitate the mobilization of public opinion against targeted individuals or organizations. Globalization amplifies these dynamics through the proliferation of digital technologies making "cancel culture" a global phenomenon. Social media is real evidence of the emergence of Cancel culture as a new popular culture that is spread through mass media, the internet, and also television (Mayasari, 2022).

Cancel Culture refers to the collective practice of people who seek to hold public figures accountable for their actions or statements that are considered to violate certain values in a social, cultural, ethical, or normative context. This action often leads to severe repercussions such as boycotts, loss of roles, and damaged reputations for individuals or groups. Cancel culture is usually carried out on social media which is very impactful for mobilizing public discourse and shaping

opinion from cancel culture which has gained significant traction globally. As Quoted by Rastati, in (Mayasari, 2022) cancel culture is the idea that someone can be “canceled” or “eliminated” which is commonly experienced by public figures or famous figures such as celebrities and politicians.

This cancel culture has been known or carried out by other countries for quite a long time, yet in Indonesia, it is not widely known or is still considered an urban phenomenon because it occurs on a micro-scale that only involves groups with good digital access and literacy (Anjarini, 2020). Along with the increasing number of social media users that are increasingly evenly distributed in Indonesia, the cancel culture has been noticed lately after several controversial cases occurred through social media involving several celebrities or public figures, making the public demand accountability firmly. Even so, some people argue that excessive cancel culture is not to the social values held by society because it does not provide a second chance to learn from their mistakes. Cancel culture easily becomes a slippery slope towards cyberbullying, as the act may narrow down the path to empathy and forgiveness towards the errant individual or organization (Roldan et al., 2024).

One country that has been implementing cancel culture for a long time is South Korea. With the influence of culture on ethical values adopted in their societal values, cancel culture in South Korea operates uniquely because it is related to moral purity, respect for elders, and national image, whereas in Western societies, cancel culture is often debated through the lens of freedom of speech and social justice. Not only emerging in Western culture, cancel culture is also spreading in China, which has significant control over media and online content in its government. In Southeast Asia as previous research conducted by Milieu in 2022 has shown that 20% of Filipinos have participated in a cancel movement (Roldan et al., 2024). Lately in Indonesia, this issue occurred to the actor Abidzar due to his controversial statement about his movie “Business Proposal” that made fans boycott. Hate speech also occurred because of an affair scandal case involving Arawinda, a young actress who is a perpetrator of a household. South Korean society highly upholds ethical and moral values, so if a scandal arises that is considered to have violated moral values involving influencer figures, then the artist or influencer can be canceled by the public (Anjarini, 2020).

The South Korean entertainment industry has become the most visible sector globally through the Korean Wave in the form of music, films, or other media narratives that reflect the sensitivity of society, including cancel culture. K-Central to the appeal of Hallyu is the widespread popularity of Korean dramas, which serve as potent vehicles for disseminating Korean culture worldwide (Andjani & Annisa, 2019). The availability of various streaming platforms to consume Korean films or drama series offers ease in accessing content from South Korea, which is supported by the binge-watching habit that tends to occur, making Indonesian society, who have a strong interest and enthusiasm for foreign cultures, an ideal audience for this digital content. According to the results of a survey conducted by Jakpat in the second half of 2023 from the Disway.id website, as many as 73% of respondents who use over-the-top (OTT) platforms such as Netflix, Vidio, and Disney+Hotstar, watch content from South Korea. This survey involved 2356 mobile entertainment users and 2446 social media users to find out the habits of Indonesian people. As many as 85% of respondents use OTT to watch films, 77% for series, and 27% to watch reality/variety shows.

The presentation of K-dramas indirectly provides an overview to audiences around the world, including Indonesia, about the authenticity of Korean people's behavior when facing issues of moral or ethical deviations that are believed by society, such as the issue of cancel culture. Research on the issue of cancel culture in films has also been conducted by Indah and Kadek by analyzing the Indonesian film 'Budi Pekerti'. The study entitled "Analysis of the Impact of Cancel Culture in the Film Budi Pekerti Semiotics Roland Barthes". This study reveals the negative and positive impacts caused by cancel culture, namely the Spiral of silence and hate comments, to losing opportunities as negative impacts, and the positive impact is that cancel culture can function as a means of social control that makes someone aware of their mistakes (Hairunissa et al., 2024). Based on previous studies, researchers want to know how cancel culture is represented in Korean film or drama. This phenomenon allows for a rich exploration of how Korean narratives engage with contemporary social issues, and cultural values often reflected in Korean movies and series, including cancel culture.

Film is made for several purposes such as for entertainment, documentary, education, or simply to tell a story about something, whether it is true events or fiction. However, a film can also be used as a medium that can be associated with social theory and other sciences in discussion or even criticism of the film (Hermanto Sihombing & Alexander Sinaga, 2021). The media narrative in the

form of film or drama has the capability of portraying the realities of cultural and social life in society. The previous research entitled "Semiotic Analysis of Bullying Representation in Korean Drama The Glory" explains the representation of bullying contained in the drama. The phenomenon of bullying is depicted as being able to occur anywhere, anytime, and by anyone, where the perpetrators of bullying tend to feel powerful so that they act as they please to students who appear weak and powerless (Yudistira et al., 2024).

Another study on the representation of social conditions contained in the film was conducted by Lambok & Agustinus with the title "Representation of Social Class in Parasite Movie". In this film, there are two families with different social classes, where the lifestyle of the Park Family represents an upper class in society, and on the other side, the Kim family's poor life represents a lower class social status (Hermanto Sihombing & Alexander Sinaga, 2021). This is depicted through the background of the lives of the two families shown in the film. This gap depicts the reality of social conditions that occur in society and sometimes cause conflicts like the plot in this film. Films can explain a condition through the storyline, the property set in the film, and the nature of a character as depicted in the study entitled "Women in Doubt: Women's Representation in K-Drama Series Search: WWW about the depiction of strong, intelligent, rational, and determined independent female characters. Although women still experience difficulties due to the patriarchal culture that is still adhered to by some people in society in this drama, women must continue to fight to pursue their dreams (Andjani & Annisa, 2019).

The relevance of this study is strengthened by the increasing global attention to Korean cultural consumption. In the contemporary landscape of communication and media, the consumption of Korean film or drama has gained significant global visibility (Andjani & Annisa, 2019). Korean series serve as critical sites for exploring the representation of cancel culture. The works illustrate how cancel culture can impact individual lives, both personally and professionally, which can also shape public perceptions about morality, accountability, and redemption. Stuart Hall emphasises representation theory that meaning is produced through signifying practices within a cultural context involving encoding and decoding processes. It posits that media texts, including films and television series, do not simply reflect reality but actively shape and construct it through various representational strategies. Researchers want to analyze the semiotic symbols used to describe cancel culture in Korean films or series.

Some of the dramas that the author chose to study include the Korean Drama Welcome to Samdal-Ri, Live On, Shadow Beauty, and Celebrity. The Korean series chosen by the researcher to be analyzed is because it contains a cancel culture theme that occurs due to scandals or rumors circulating through social media, causing negative comments towards someone who is canceled, regardless of whether the news is factual or not. Semiotics study helps in interpreting the underlying messages conveyed through visual and narrative elements, that is relevant on how films and dramas position cancel culture as part of a large social dynamic. Through semiotic content analysis, this research aims to decode complex meanings embedded in the representations of the drama, as it is considered the medium that is rich in symbols and signs to be analyzed.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze how cancel culture is represented in selected Korean films and dramas. Qualitative methods are chosen because of their ability to explore complex and in-depth cultural representations, allowing researchers to uncover hidden meanings in visual texts, narratives, and symbolic elements in the media. This approach also allows for the interpretation of the messages underlying media content, which play a role in shaping social reality through cultural representations presented to the audience.

The researcher uses semiotic content analysis, with Roland Barthes' semiotic approach as the main framework to examine how cancel culture is constructed in Korean films and dramas. Barthes divides signs into two levels of meaning. First is denotation which refers to the direct or literal meaning of a sign. And connotation refers to a deeper meaning, influenced by culture, ideology, and social context. Through this analysis, the study aims to explore how cancel culture is depicted in Korean media to uncover the messages and myths conveyed in Korean films and dramas.

The primary data in this study consisted of Korean films and dramas that explicitly or implicitly depict cancel culture. The selected media must meet certain criteria related to cancel culture, such as

narratives involving social boycotts, public condemnation, or manipulation of public opinion. These criteria ensure that the selected films and dramas provide a relevant and in-depth depiction of how cancel culture is represented. Several selected dramas include *Welcome to Samdal-ri* (2023), which tells the story of a celebrity who loses her popularity due to a scandal and must return to her hometown to recover. The drama *Celebrity* (2023) was also chosen because it focuses on the life of an influencer who is destroyed by cancel culture after her small mistake goes viral. In addition, *Live On* (2020) will be analyzed because it depicts how bullying and mass judgment on social media affect the lives of high school students. Finally, *Shadow Beauty* (2021) was chosen because it explores the double life of a teenager who uses social media to create a perfect persona but is threatened with judgment when her secret is revealed.

These dramas will be analyzed using Barthes' semiotic approach to examine the denotation, connotation, and myths surrounding cancel culture in Korean media. The research will focus on identifying and interpreting signs, symbols, and narratives related to cancel culture, by paying attention to characterization, dialogue, plot development, and visual elements. In addition to primary data, secondary data will also be used to support the analysis. This data includes academic articles on cancel culture and semiotics to provide a theoretical basis, as well as using news and media reviews related to the films/dramas that are the objects of research to strengthen the interpretation of cancel culture research in Korean films and dramas.

Data collection is carried out through documentation of various sources, including written materials, narrative and visual content, and digital media. The researcher will apply Roland Barthes' semiotic model to analyze the denotative and connotative meanings in selected films and dramas. This process involves identifying literal and symbolic meanings and examining how these meanings interact with the broader cultural context. With this approach, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how cancel culture is represented in Korean media and how this representation influences social discourse on accountability, reputation, and public perception in the digital era.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Presenting the Results

Public Figure as the Object of Cancel Culture

The practice of cancel culture usually occurs on social media involving public figures or whoever considered having enough impact on influencing public in digital space. In this study, it was found that the characteristics of the object of cancel culture are someone who is popular and becomes the center of attention or someone's role model.



Figure 1. Social media profile of an influencer

The scene in Figure 1.1 denotatively shows the social media profile of an Influencer with the username _seoari with 1309 posts, 1.3 million followers and 514 followings and the Instagram account @ari.and_official listed in her bio which is the fashion brand she owns. Connotatively, the blue check mark next to the username indicates that the account has been verified as an official and authentic account which means that the account represents a public figure, brand, celebrity or other important entity. The mark represents sufficient credibility and popularity for easy account

identification. The comparison of the number of followers with fewer followings indicates the exclusivity she has, this indicates a strong influence to reach the audience with her own content. The brand account listed in the bio also shows its ownership and association with the account and the brand.

Dialogue in "Celebrity", CEO Ju Seung-hyeok's character, is explaining the job of an influencer by saying "When your followers reach a thousand, it's all yours. A better term is sponsored. Everything in this world can be sponsored for celebrities with thousands of followers just by writing a hashtag. Do you understand now, why are they desperately looking for a thousand followers? Hashtag itself is a term used to refer to a type of metadata label used on social media. Sponsorship is a form of support for events, activities or parties that are commercial in nature for promotion.

Connotatively, the meaning of sponsored here is that influencers gain financial benefits while increasing their visibility and audience reach. So with the increasing number of followers that public figures have, it indicates their increasing social status, making the sponsorship offers given will continue to produce more and more sustainable followers. Therefore, they struggle to find ways to increase followers in order to get a lot of support in easy ways such as writing hashtags that mean categorizing content to make it easier to search, and branding brands or information that can become a trend. This is reinforced by the dialogue of the main character Seo-Ari who said; "followers, how many people know and see me. Power and money come from there." This section explains that power symbolized by money and power can be obtained by an influencer depending on the number of followers they have. The higher the number of followers they have, the greater the benefits they can get because many individuals see and recognize a public figure.



Figure 2. The luxurious life an influencer had

The depiction of public figures can also be seen from Yoon Jeong-sun's dialogue in "Celebrity" as a follower who said: "When I see their glamor, my mood becomes good. Who knows? If I follow them, one day I will be like them. Denotatively, followers follow a celebrity's social media because they like their luxurious life which raises the hope that followers can also be like them. The connotative meaning of a glamorous life can indicate a person's success by being in the upper class in social status which is considered important for some circles. By following the life of a successful and famous public figure, a person can be motivated to have a life that is considered enjoyable like the one they idolize.

This is shown visually in Figure 1.2 with the denotative meaning, namely the scene was taken using the long shot camera technique showing someone in ordinary clothes standing in the middle of a walk-in closet with a luxurious design containing glamorous clothes, jewelry, and bags. Connotatively, this shows the difference in social class between an ordinary person and a celebrity based on the lifestyle they have. This shooting angle shows the splendor of the room which contains items usually used by a celebrity as a background which depicts a glamorous life with objects that appear smaller, showing a gesture of admiration for the life of an upper-class person.



Figure 3. The spotlight for an influencer as the center of attention

In “Celebrity”, CEO Ju Seung-hyeok’s character says: “Just by uploading your daily life, people will ask about the items they wear. Then, they will promote the product in limited quantities and sell it. That’s how they make money.” Denotatively, Someone who follows an influencer’s daily life will follow the lifestyle they promote. With limited production or special editions, connotatively, the exclusivity offered by an influencer makes followers more interested and tempted to become part of the trend created by the public figure. This illustrates that the spotlight of public figures is obtained because followers will imitate the items or activities they have. Like the scene in Figure 1.3 which denotatively shows a public figure in the middle of a crowd of people who are being highlighted by recording it using a cellphone showing an enthusiastic and amazed expression. The connotative meaning of this Long Shot camera shot, the camera angle indicates the focus of the object in the middle as the center of attention of the people around him. This shows his popularity which attracts the attention and interest of people who describe his likes.

The myth that emerged was that public figures or someone who is influential in society are often positioned as perfect figures who should not make mistakes in their personal or professional lives. Society in Korea has very high expectations of celebrities and public figures because the public believes that they are ideal moral role models without blemish. If they violate the values adopted by society, they tend to be intolerant and carry out mass rejection. In a country where celebrity privacy lacks protection, society tends to be intolerant and immediately carries out mass rejection if a violation occurs, according to *website The Korea Herald*. The myth that “public figures are immune from social punishment if they are famous” is actually more vulnerable because the media and public spotlight is very large.

Scandals as the Cause of Cancel Culture

Cancel culture, which arises from a collective sense of judgment, often targets public figures or groups considered to have crossed ethical lines, particularly in the wake of scandals. These controversies typically center around issues such as bullying, racism, or abuse. In *Welcome to Samdal-ri*, the photographer Cho Eun-hye becomes entangled in cancel culture after rumors spread about her alleged mistreatment of an assistant. Denotatively, the news portrays a narrative of workplace abuse leading to an assistant's suicide attempt, which not only results in the cancellation of a major exhibition but also ignites a wave of online backlash. Connotatively, Cho is branded as unethical, seen as someone who leveraged her position of power to harm others. A parallel can be drawn in *Celebrity*, where Seo A-ri's manipulation of Oh Min-hye threatening to reveal a damaging secret and her attempt to sidestep drug-related allegations with other influencers, provoke public outrage. Denotatively, Seo A-ri is depicted wielding influence over Oh Min-hye, while distancing herself from scandal. Connotatively, this act reveals the darker side of influencer culture, where public figures can manipulate narratives and audiences, regardless of the truth, ultimately fueling the cycle of cancel culture against those around them.



Figure 4. Public figure scandal news on the internet.

The cause of Cancel Culture is also depicted in "Live On" which shows the comment "She is so fake and so evil. I witnessed school violence, did she forget what she did?". Denotatively, the comment reveals that Baek Ho-rang's character as an influencer is a very evil and fake person because someone actually witnessed violence at school related to her. The connotative meaning of this scene is that bullying is an act that is considered evil and inappropriate because it violates social norms. The word fake means that the reality of Baek Ho-rang as an influencer does not show good behavior that is contrary to the reputation and popularity she has on social media. As in Figure 2.1 with the denotation, Someone is reading an article on the internet about the news of rumors of bullying an influencer named Baek Ho-rang. With the headline of the article, "There is evidence that Baek Ho-rang is a bully and a photo added to strengthen the news. Connotatively, this scene shows that someone is interested in knowing the rumors or following the life of a public figure. The private life of a public figure becomes a media commodity, privacy is not only for public consumption but can also be sold as clickbait news.

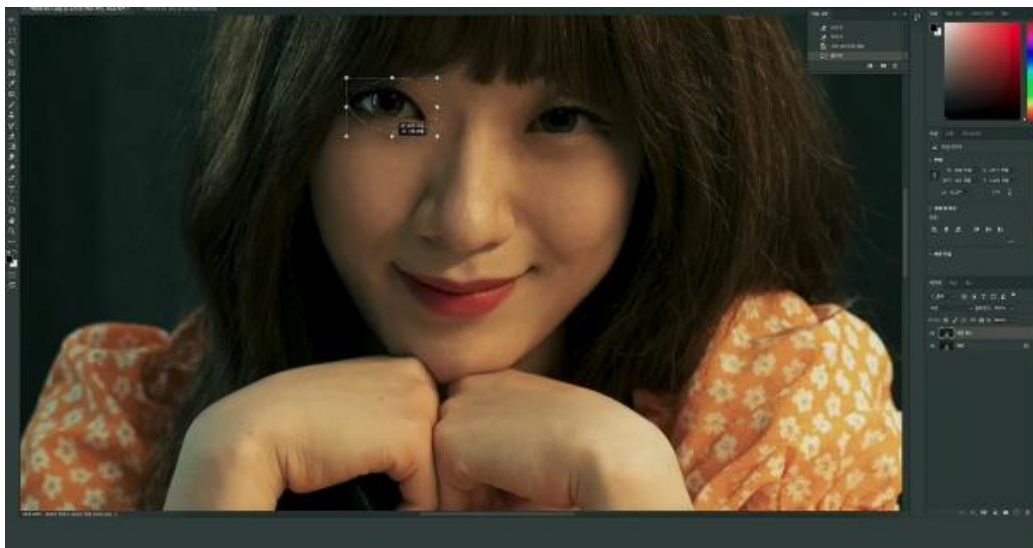


Figure 4. Photo edited using Adobe Photoshop

In *Shadow Beauty*, the wave of angry comments such as "We were deceived! Is that her real face? No wonder I felt something was off. What a pathological liar" reflects the public's sense of betrayal upon discovering that Gu Ae Jin's carefully crafted online persona was a facade. On a denotative level, this reveals the stark contrast between her real appearance and the idealized image she projected. Connotatively, her actions are framed as a serious ethical violation; as a beauty influencer, she breached the trust that formed the foundation of her relationship with her audience. The accusation of being a "pathological liar," with its heavy psychological implication, deepens the

public's condemnation, positioning her deception as a grave offense against societal norms. Figure 2.2 visually reinforces this narrative, showing a beauty influencer undergoing digital manipulation through Photoshop. While denotatively capturing the act of editing, the image also connotes a deeper message about deception highlighting how influencers may construct false realities under the pressure of unattainable beauty standards, ultimately risking the well-being and trust of those who admire them.

The Myth is rumors spread in the Korean entertainment industry often develop so that they are believed by the public even without strong evidence. The belief that once a celebrity is involved in a rumor, whether true or not, their career can be completely destroyed even though not all rumors are proven to be true. A celebrity, Song Ji-ah, was canceled for wearing fake designer clothes which is considered a serious problem by Korean society, in Western society this kind of thing is rarely a problem. In addition, issues related to school bullying, drug use, draft dodging, and drunk driving emerged as triggers for a potential public backlash and were common points of contention for the careers of Korean celebrities, as referenced in a website *The Korea Herald*. The lives of public figures are often followed by fans who eventually become objects of public consumption, making Cancel Culture inevitable for public figures because society feels entitled to control their lives as if public opinion to expose and judge is a form of absolute justice.

Hate Comment as the Form of Cancel Culture

The form of mass behavior to cancel problematic public figures is done differently, such as boycotting or throwing hate speech with the aim of showing the termination of support for the person concerned. In "Celebrity" there is a comment that reads: "Seo Ari finally killed someone, Director Ari. & committed suicide because of pressure from him." And in "Welcome to Samdal-ri" with the comment "Power hungry and embarrassing Korea, just die. He should have committed suicide. The denotative meaning of the scene is the provision of negative comments on the internet that corner the public figure by saying that he is the reason someone is depressed and loses his life. The person who commits suicide should be someone who behaves badly because of a thirst for power which only embarrasses the country of Korea. Connotatively, this illustrates hate speech against the public figure who is being canceled so that they think about their bad actions or behavior that can harm others. Public anger is clearly depicted with full emphasis and curses, even threatening.

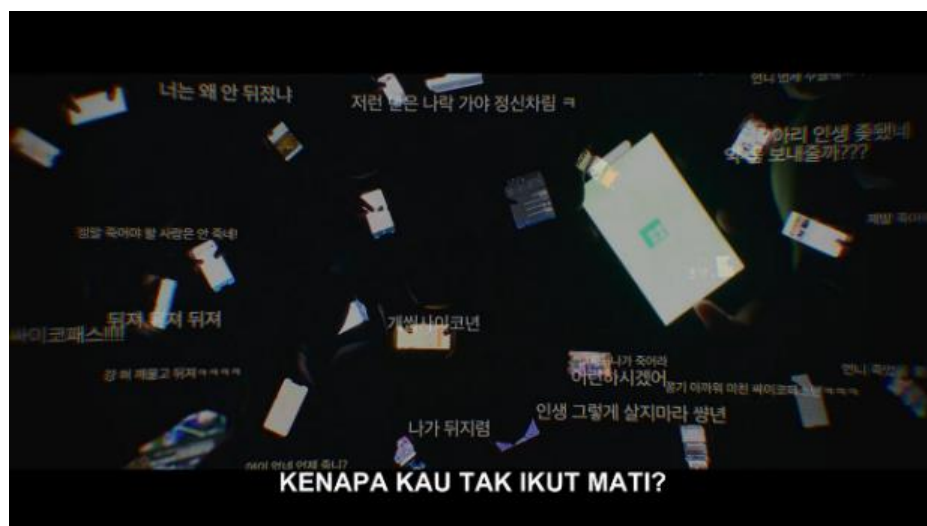


Figure 5. Collection of hate comments as behavior to cancel public figures

It can be seen in Figure 3.1 with the denotation in this scene there are words that are blasphemous comments or expressions of hatred that people type on their cellphone screens with a black background. Connotatively, this scene shows a collection of public power in expressing their anger towards public figures for their behavior or words that are considered bad and violate social values. The dark background with the light coming from the cellphone screen shows the dark side of negative internet use as a forum for mass justice and the activeness of users in voicing their opinions to cancel public figures both by using constructive and threatening words.



Figure 6. Boycotting product

In Figure 3.2, the denotative meaning of the scene is seen as someone is watching an officer returning a bunch of boxes containing fashion products with the Ari.& brand listed on the outside of the cardboard packaging until they pile up in the warehouse. The connotation of this camera angle focuses on someone returning the boxes witnessed by someone signifying the economic destruction they experienced as a form of public reaction in boycotting someone who was canceled due to their controversy. Literally, what was returned was not only the goods but also their trust in the public figure. Boycotting is also depicted as happening to people who are related to the canceled character. In the drama "Welcome to Samdal-Ri" the character Cho Jin-dal as the older brother of the public figure asks about the job application submitted to his friend with dialogues such as, "Am I accepted?," Cho Jin-dal's friend: "No. Your sister's case will be used as a reason for your rejection for the time being. Is the rumor true?" This scene shows that a company or other party does not want to be associated with someone who is scandalized in order to avoid their association with the party being canceled. This means that boycotting by stopping providing support or cooperation is one form of cancel culture behavior.

The myth that emerged was that Cancel culture in Korea happened very quickly, even before the complete facts were revealed due to the massive influence of the media. Cancel culture is considered a form of pure social justice, even though in practice it is often influenced by media pressure, public opinion, and does not always provide space for clarification or recovery for victims (yingyeo journal). Social media is often said to be a place for expression and connection, but in reality not all opinions can be expressed freely because there are moral values that apply in social ethics so that it can actually become a space for collective judgment and digital voyeurism.

Destructive Impact of Cancel Culture



Figure 7. The canceled character experiences stress and self-isolation

Cancel culture has a destructive impact on its victims. As in Figure 4.1 in "Shadow Beauty" which has the denotation of the main female character Gu Ae Jin as a Beauty Influencer leaning on the bed in a bedroom with minimal light and dark color tones showing a gloomy expression with a flat and empty gaze. Connotation: The gloomy expression while leaning depicts the physical and emotional exhaustion experienced by the character. The dark color in the atmosphere used builds the emotions of depression and downfall shown in the scene.



Figure 8. The perpetrator commits suicide due to a product boycott.

In addition, the impact of cancel culture victims is also depicted in "Celebrity" in Figure 4.2 with the meaning of Denotation The scene is shot using a close-up angle that highlights both feet wearing shoes covered with a cloth with a box of fashion brand products Ari.& and glass bottles of alcohol scattered around it. In Connotation, the object of a person lying covered with a cloth indicates someone who has died. He committed suicide due to the pressure felt within himself due to the social boycott of the products he produced resulting in huge economic losses. The scattered alcohol symbolizes the frustration and stress felt with uncontrolled consumption. Which is reinforced by Seo A-Ri's dialogue, "I can't stand it anymore. I can't stand it anymore." which implies the severity of the difficulties he is facing makes him suffer from emotional pressure that he can no longer bear.



Figure 9. Journalists demand an explanation of the circulating rumors.

In Figure 4.3 shows a scene in "Welcome to Samdal-Ri" with the denotation, many journalists gathered with cameras and microphones to take pictures and interview public figures with curious and compelling expressions with demanding and pressing gestures until the public figure's character shows a gesture of being pressured. This scene was taken from behind the side of the public figure with a medium close-up technique. Connotative Meaning: This camera angle focuses on the condition of the public figure's character who is being pressured with the expressions and gestures of journalists who are crowding around asking questions and demanding explanations of the rumors

circulating about him. This illustrates the pressure given by the masses to a public figure when involved in a negative scandal that is considered detrimental and violates applicable social norms.



Figure 10. Public petition creation website to investigate Taegang Law Firm

“Celebrity” in Figure 4.4 Denotative meaning in this scene shows an online petition website created by the Korean public to approve the investigation of the Taegang law firm regarding corruption and crime exposure related to influencer Seo-Ari which has been signed by 29,067 people who agree. Connotatively this scene interprets a call for justice, transparency, and accountability for alleged violations that have occurred. in the text which means Your proposal, our agreement, joint legislation implies that this petition is a form of public participation in the legislative process and law enforcement.

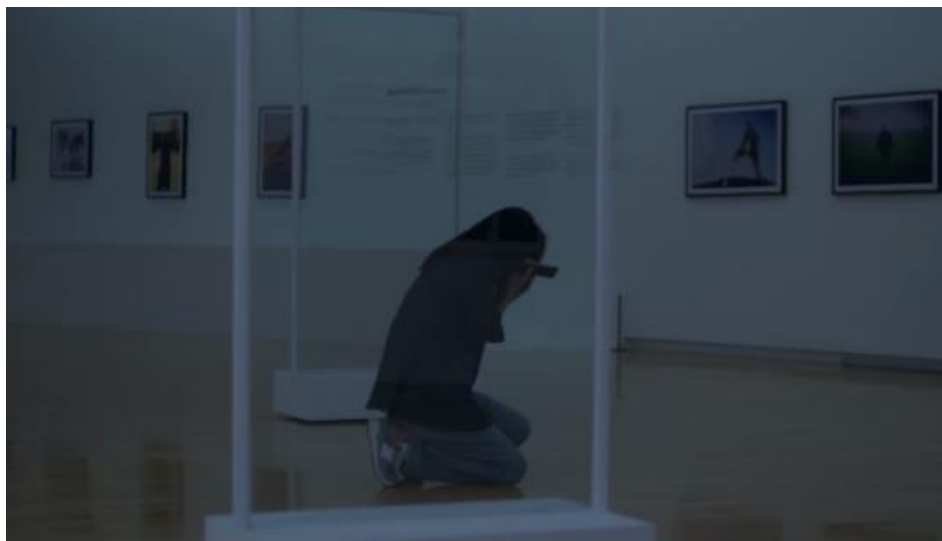


Figure 11. Photographers are devastated by the cancellation of their photo exhibitions.

Next in Figure 4.5 has Denotation meaning that someone is kneeling and covering his face while holding a cellphone showing a gesture of depression in the middle of a room surrounded by photo frames and tripod banners used as a photography exhibition. The connotation is that the female character Cho Eun Hye as a famous photographer is experiencing deep sadness which is shown through the gesture of her body kneeling because she is crying out of breath and the cellphone she is holding after receiving a call that her photo exhibition must be canceled due to a scandal related to the abuse of power she experienced. Controversy against public figures can have an impact on the destruction of reputation and loss of work because of public anger demanding accountability from public figures as a form of responsibility for their behavior in the scope and social morals.

The myth experiencing cancel culture in Korea has a very heavy impact on a person's mentality, reputation and career. Getting a second chance is possible but challenging in Korea because the social stigma there is so strong that many never really recover from cancel culture, although the myth is that they can still return after being boycotted. (herald article). The assumption that cancel culture is an effective tool of social control depends on the issue at hand because its impact is very destructive and disproportionate to the mistakes made.

3.2. Create a Discussion

This study reveals that cancel culture in Korean media is constructed through media influence, societal values, and public behavior. Using Roland Barthes' semiotics, findings show public figures (influencers, celebrities, students with online presence) are primary targets of scrutiny. The results of the analysis obtained from four Korean dramas show that cancel culture tends to be displayed in three main forms, namely; Social and economic boycotts, public pressure that affects the lives of public figures, and demands for public accountability. Rumors and controversies involving public figures are the main triggers for cancel culture with the media as a supporter that accelerates public perception. Denotatively, it is depicted via social media profiles and online activity, symbolizing credibility and influence. Connotatively, these signify power to shape public opinion.

Korean narratives highlight cancel culture's duality: as social control fostering moral responsibility, yet causing psychological trauma, reputational damage, and social isolation. Unlike Western contexts focused on free speech, Korean cancel culture emphasizes collective ethics and honor (*chemyon*), with severe consequences for norm violations, as seen in *Celebrity* and *Welcome to Samdal-ri*. This aligns with (Anjarini, 2020) and by (Lee & Abidin, 2024), who note Korea's sensitivity to moral purity. In contrast, Indonesian cancel culture often serves educational purposes (Tanesha & Indriani, 2021), reflecting permissive collectivism versus Korea's conservative rigidity (Hairunissa et al., 2024). The analysis uncovers a mythic layer which is redemption through penance and public acknowledgment, as in *Welcome to Samdal-ri*. While punitive, Korean narratives allow restorative justice within strict cultural boundaries, differing from studies focusing solely on punishment. This highlights how media negotiates morality and reputation, reflecting societal demands for moral perfection from public figures.

Through this study, the layered and specific semiotic codes that shape cancel culture can be identified, showing that it is not simply a mechanism of social control, but also a narrative space where issues of morality, reputation, and the possibility of redemption are negotiated. This study reveals that cancel culture in Korean media reflects the character of a society that demands perfection of moral image from public figures. This shows the power of media and cultural expectations of mistakes made, which reflect the social values that are held. In this context, cancel culture in Korea is related to the view that public figures are collective moral symbols where one mistake can destroy someone's career. This creates a view that society feels entitled to "punish" through social and digital mechanisms. The study's focus on a few selected dramas may limit the full spectrum of cancel culture representation in Korean media, although a semiotic approach provides a robust framework for interpreting the deep cultural meanings embedded in these narratives. Further research could expand the sample or employ audience studies to understand how viewers interpret and respond to these representations.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that the representation of cancel culture in Korean films and dramas is greatly influenced by social structures, cultural values, and the dynamics of digital media. Cancel culture is described as a complex social phenomenon, where public figures become the main objects of mass judgment due to violations of moral or ethical values spread through social media. Semiotic analysis shows that signs in narratives such as visuals, dialogues, social symbols and conflicts are interpreted literally as well as the accompanying ideological cultural meanings and myths.

Cancel culture in Korea has unique characteristics that emphasize the importance of honor, morality, and collective image, so that public reactions to scandals or violations of norms tend to be harsher and have a wider impact. Although cancel culture can function as social control, this practice also has the potential to cause negative impacts in the form of trauma, loss of opportunities, and

reputational damage that is difficult to restore as a form of reflection of social criticism and a fairly contradictory narrative of public moral power.

This study aims to analyze the representation of cancel culture in Korean films and dramas through Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis approach with the results showing that cancel culture is a complex social phenomenon, which is influenced by strong moral and ethical values in South Korean society. Through representations in films and dramas, Korean media convey to the audience the process of cancel culture that affects the lives of public figures in the digital era. Thus, this study makes an important contribution to understanding how media shapes, represents, and interprets cancel culture as part of contemporary cultural dynamics. These findings enrich the existing literature on cancel culture and provide new insights into the interaction between media representations, cultural values, and social discourses in the digital era. Further research is needed to explore the long-term impact of cancel culture on individuals and society. Future research can consider how cancel culture interacts with other social, psychological, and cultural factors. It is recommended to expand the analysis to a broader range of media texts and to investigate audience reception to better understand the societal impact of these representations. In addition, comparative studies between cancel culture in South Korea and other countries can provide a broader perspective on this phenomenon to elucidate the evolving nature of cancel culture in both Korean and global contexts.

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