

## Cancel Culture as a New Social Movement

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**ABSTRACT:** Cancel culture is one of the phenomena that we usually see on social media, especially on Twitter. As we are living in this era of new media made this phenomenon a form of new social movement. The hashtag #CancelNetflix went viral on Twitter in September 2020. It is a movement made by the audience to criticize Netflix for releasing the film *Cuties* as it is believed that the film normalizes child sexualization and supports child pornography. Not only that, the audience believes that the film could normalize pedophilia. This paper aims to understand how cancel culture works as a new social movement, which in this case #CancelNetflix. The theories for this paper are new media and new social media. The method used is qualitative using a constructivist paradigm. The primary data collected from tweets from the users regarding the case.

**Keywords** –Cancel culture, new media, social movement, Twitter, #CancelNetflix

### I. INTRODUCTION

The term cancel culture has become popular all around the new media era. The art of canceling has been a pretty common phenomenon usually on social media, especially on Twitter. Previously, canceling was used to reject an object, but now the cancel culture is related to withdrawing support for community leaders in response to unpleasant behavior or opinions (Dershowitz, 2020). It turns out that not only the withdrawal of support for community leaders, cancel culture is also used for boycotting an organization, including digital entertainment.

Netflix as one of the biggest streaming platforms in the world is one of the organizations that is often boycotted by the public. Starting from the public's frustration with Netflix which stopped the production of some of its series that has only been running for one season, to what is quite new and has shocked the public is the release of a film called *Cuties* directed by Maimouna Doucouré. According to Variety, the film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival where Doucouré won the World Cinematic Directing Award. Prior to the screening at Sundance, Netflix had purchased worldwide rights (excluding France) for this film (Spangler, 2020).

As a platform that is both digital-based, Netflix uses social media as one of its marketing tools to promote its new products. Likewise, what was done by Netflix in promoting the film *Cuties*. It's just that the material used to promote the *Cuties* film has been criticized by the public.

One month before its release, Netflix uploaded *Cuties* promotional material on Twitter. The upload immediately drew criticism because it was deemed inappropriate. According to Vanity Fair, *Cuties*' trailer is given this description: "Amy, 11, got blown away by the twerking dance crew. Hoping to join them, she begins to explore her femininity, defying her family traditions". Meanwhile, the movie poster shows the cast as children posing seductively with their stomachs exposed while wearing shorts and a crop top (Rosen, 2020). Netflix faced backlash from the audience. The upload from Netflix has turned *Cuties* into controversy, especially on Twitter. The audience began to cancel Netflix using the hashtag #CancelNetflix as a form of disappointment.



Figure 1. *Cuties* Poster and Descriptions, @8wariorlottle, Twitter, 2020

Netflix posted an apology tweet in response of the controversy. Not satisfied with the apology, the audience continued to use the hashtag #CancelNetflix to ask Netflix not to release *Cuties* which was scheduled to be released on 9 September 2020, on the grounds that Netflix exploited the sexuality of girls through *Cuties* which served child pornography and had the potential to trigger pedophilia as the issue itself has been a major problem worldwide.

The cancel culture phenomenon as a social movement as in this case has a big impact on Netflix as an organization. After the release of *Cuties* on September 9, 2020, the hashtag #CancelNetflix has become worldwide trending on Twitter. This has an impact on the decrease in the number of Netflix subscribers which has increased drastically (Fauziah, 2020). Of course, the new media era has had a huge impact on new social movements. Kurnia (2005) concludes the difference between traditional media and new media. From the old and new media models presented by Kurnia, it is clear that the sources of information in the old model are very limited, in contrast to the new models where there are many sources of information.

New social movement actions by utilizing social media have been carried out by many individuals and organizations. Mahaswari (2012) in her research on Jalin Merapi concluded that the use of new media is able to support a social movement because of the high social motives and social capital of the community in the practice of using the media. Sari and Siahainenia (2015) who examined new social movements in virtual public spaces in the Satinah case showed that virtual space has been able to become a public space for people to defend themselves and fight back through collective citizen activities driven by certain actors.

Based on the background of this case, the aim of this research is to understand how cancel culture, works as a new social movement, which in this case #CancelNetflix. The method of this research is qualitative using a constructivist paradigm.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### New Media and Social Media

McQuail (2011, p.44) stated that the new media is a collection of different communication technologies that share certain features, in addition to being only recently made possible by digitization and widely available for personal use as a communication device. The most important characteristics of new media are interconnection, their access to individual audiences as message recipients and senders, their interactivity, their various uses as an open character, and their "everywhere" nature.

One part of new media is social media. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as a group of internet-based applications that build on the foundation of Web 2.0 ideology and technology and enable the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Nurhalimah, 2019, p.27). Social media is computer-mediated technology that enables the creation and sharing of information, ideas, and other forms of expression through virtual communities and networks (Quesenberry, 2019, p. 338).

In this research, the social media used is Twitter. By definition, Twitter is an online social networking service that allows users to send short messages with a limited number of characters (Queensberry, 2019, p.340). One of the features of Twitter is trending topics.

### New Social Movement

Social movement according to Anthony Giddens is a collective effort to realize a common interest or common goal through collective action outside the scope of established institutions (Putra, 2006, p.3). Social movements can be classified into two, the old social movement and the new social movement. According to Pichardo and Singh in Suharko (2006), differentiate the two based on four characteristics, namely: 1) ideology and goals, 2) tactics and organization; 3) participants and actors; 4) terrain and area. According to Martin (2001), the new social movement is relevant because it focuses on changing the culture of society and solving problems.

Macionis (2017, p.631) defines social movements as an organized activities that encourage or prevent social change. According to Blumer, Mauss, and Tilly in Macionis (2017, p.639), there are four stages of social movement:

1. Emergence stage. Social movement occurs because it is driven by the perception that everything is not going properly.
2. Coalescence stage. A social movement must define itself and develop a strategy for "going public" where at this stage, the movement may engage in collective action.
3. Bureaucratization stage. A social movement must become an established, bureaucratic organization. The movement relies more on a capable staff.
4. Decline stage. Social movements begin to decline but can also be accepted as a part of the system.

### III. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a constructivist paradigm. According to Denzin & Lincoln (2018, p.128), constructivists assume that our knowledge of real things is never direct but mediated by concepts and language, language, and practical interests. The method used for this research is qualitative through the case study.

The data collection technique used for this research is through primary and secondary data collection. Primary data were obtained from literature studies on the theory of new media for new social movements. In addition, primary data was also obtained from document analysis in the form of tweets using the hashtag #CancelNetflix. Secondary data were obtained from literature studies on journals that have similar topics to this research. To further strengthen, secondary data used besides that is the study of the #CancelNetflix case reporting documentation in online media.

### IV. DISCUSSION

Netflix is a subscription-based streaming service that allows members to watch TV shows and movies without ads on devices connected to the internet. Netflix content varies by region and is subject to change over time. Subscribers can watch a wide variety of Netflix Originals, TV shows, films, award-winning documentaries, and more (Netflix, n.d.).

Cuties is one of the films released by Netflix based on the award-winning short film from France at Sundance. This film tells the story of Amy, an 11-year-old girl who joins a group of dancers called "the cuties" at school, and quickly realizes her developing femininity - disturbing her mother and her grades in the process (IMDB, n.d.).

The hashtag #CancelNetflix began to rise from the controversial poster used by Netflix to promote Cuties in August 2020. But the hashtag went trending after the release of Cuties in September 2020. By analyzing tweets on Twitter using the hashtag #CancelNetflix and looking at the development of this phenomenon, the discussion of this research starts from the stages of social movement:

- Emergence Stage. At this early stage, #CancelNetflix was created as a form of criticism towards Netflix. The hashtag #CancelNetflix has existed on Twitter before this case, but it went viral when Netflix released the promotional material for Cuties. As stated before, Netflix made an apology statement on Twitter. In that tweet, Netflix stated that they are going to update the pictures and descriptions for Cuties.



Figure 2. Netflix Apology, @netflix, Twitter, 2020

The apology given by Netflix did not change the audience's perception of Cuties. They insisted that Cuties should not be released because of the inappropriate material used by Netflix. The audience began to show more concern about the matter because they found that the film is problematic, even though it has not been released yet. It is believed that the film normalizes child sexualization and supports child pornography. Not only that, the audience believes that the film could normalize pedophilia which is a serious issue.

- Coalescence stage. At this stage, the hashtag #CancelNetflix began to define itself and has developed a strategy for "going public" to engage a collective action through Twitter by using one of its features. Continuing the audience's statement of disappointment with Netflix that has no sign of taking down Cuties, audiences began to use the hashtag #CancelNetflix in every tweet regarding the movie to gain more awareness about the matter. Not only by using #CancelNetflix, but the audience also used several related hashtags for the movement like #CancelCuties, #NetflixPedofilia, and #SaveOurChildren. Along with the use of the hashtags, some of the users even unsubscribed their Netflix account and upload pictures as proof in response to Cuties.

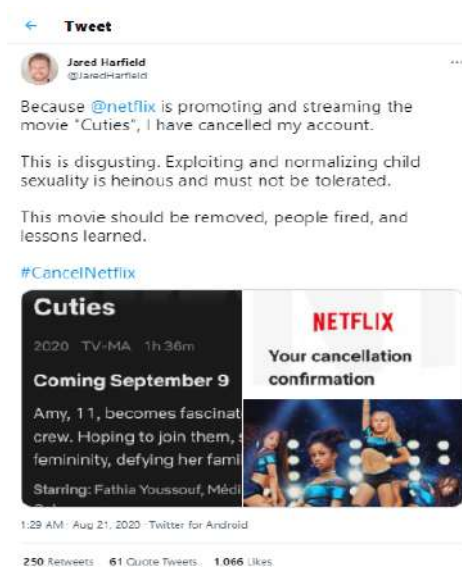


Figure 3. Cancelled Netflix Account, @JaredHarfield, Twitter, 2020

- Bureaucratization stage. The hashtag #CancelNetflix became an established, bureaucratic organization. It has verified Twitter users talking about the case. At this stage, the audience began to take advantage of new media to distribute links containing petitions to bring down Cuties. This petition was created by one of the Twitter audience with the username @JcoolGuyz the first time in August when Netflix released the promotion material on Twitter, which unfortunately is not available anymore.



Figure 4. Petition to Remove Cuties, @JCoolGuyz, Twitter, 2020.

- Even after all the efforts made by the audience, Netflix still released the movie on 9 September 2020 and led the hashtag #CancelNetflix to reach its peak. On the same day, the hashtag became the number one trending topic on Twitter. Netflix lost a big number of subscribers. Even after that, Netflix still did not take down the film and it began to enter the decline stage.

Unfortunately, the use of #CancelNetflix did not show a satisfying outcome for its audience. Netflix did not take down Cuties and people can still stream Cuties online. At the emergence stage, Netflix faced criticism for the poster of Cuties. Even though Netflix then changed the poster and description, the audience did not stop there and asked for Netflix to take down Cuties, which is a different context. Some of the users cancelled their Netflix subscription without even seeing the film just based on the poster alone. This shows that it turns out the emotional aspect beats the logic of literacy. It could happen because the audience has experience or expectations about a certain situation related about the issue and causes them to lose literacy awareness.

As we can see on the bureaucratization stage, the movement became organized. There are many of verified accounts that supported the hashtag and encouraged more audience to sign the petition. Users from the US Government tweeted about this and even made an open letter telling Netflix to take down Cuties. The result of this case happened because the message that the audience wanted to convey ended up straying everywhere. It was found that some of the audience connected this case with political issues as if there were other agenda regarding the organization. Because of that, the main issue of the case was put aside and eventually started to decline.

## V. CONCLUSION

The use of social media for social movement has been effective these days, especially on Twitter. For example, the case of #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter. It was found that cancel culture activities are massive.

Even though the result of this case did not match the audience's expectations, but they have tried their best to try and reach their purpose. The communicator and the audience used the new media at their best.

To make a new social movement to give out the best result, researchers suggest that it is important to have one purpose of communication so it will not get out of context. Researchers also suggest and persuade others to make research about the related topic because cancel culture is massive and can be studied from a different point of view.

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