TOXIC POSITIVITY: THE DYNAMICS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION ON MEDIA X IN THE ERA OF CANCEL CULTURE

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article history:	*This study aims to examine the dynamics of interpersonal communication on the Media X platform within the context of the phenomena of toxic positivity and cancel culture. These two phenomena represent a paradox of digital culture: on one hand, there is an incessant push for maintaining positivity, often dismissing the validity of negative emotions; on the other hand, there is the rise of collective cancellation practices that can create intense social pressure. This research employs a qualitative approach using a netnographic strategy, supported by content analysis of user-generated posts and interactions. Data were collected through digital observation, documentation of online conversations, and the use of Brand24 as a social media analytics tool. The findings reveal that toxic positivity is frequently normalised through phrases such as "keep your spirits up," which appear across various emotional contexts but tend to suppress more honest and complex emotional expressions. Simultaneously, cancel culture has evolved as a mechanism of collective moral control, often enacted without clarification processes or opportunities for restitution. These phenomena shape a communication landscape characterised not only by rapid and emotional exchanges but also by intense social and symbolic pressures. This study underscores the necessity for critical awareness and ethical communication practices within a digital ecosystem marked by polarisation. In conclusion, online spaces require a more reflective, empathetic, and inclusive communication approach to ensure that digital practices support emotional well-being and foster humane dialogue, rather than merely reinforcing image management.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Amid the rise of digital culture, the phenomena of toxic positivity and cancel culture have emerged as two paradoxical forces shaping communication patterns in modern society, particularly on social media platforms such as X. According to

global data from 2022, X had 238 million active users worldwide, with Indonesia ranking fifth, contributing approximately 18.45 million active users or about 5.22% of the national population. These statistics highlight the significant and widespread influence of Media X in shaping the social and emotional communication landscape in Indonesia, especially among the younger generation, for whom digital media serves as a primary medium of expression and interaction.

Toxic positivity refers to the tendency to enforce positive outlooks and reject the existence of negative emotions such as sadness, anger, or disappointment. On the surface, this attitude appears to promote enthusiasm and motivation; however, psychologically, it can have counterproductive effects. According to psychologist Whitney Goodman (2021), Toxic positivity encourages individuals to deny valid emotional experiences, thereby hindering the processes of healing and personal growth. In social media interactions, this tendency is often manifested through comments such as "stay strong" or "just think positively," which, in effect, diminish the space for accepting an individual's emotional reality.

On the other hand, cancel culture has developed as an extreme collective response to behaviours or opinions deemed inconsistent with the prevailing social norms of online communities. On Media X, this phenomenon is accelerated by features such as hashtags (#), which enable topics to go viral within a short span of time. When an individual is perceived to have committed an offence, the mass response from other users often involves condemnation, boycotts, and even a significant deterioration of reputation. This culture gives rise to a dilemma between the principles of freedom of expression and the necessity for social accountability (Fernando et al., 2022).

The relationship between toxic positivity and cancel culture creates a complex dynamic of interpersonal communication within digital spaces. While one side tends to avoid negative emotions and attempts to frame all interactions positively, the other demands absolute morality and punishes any perceived deviation. When these two extremes converge within an online conversation, what often ensues is polarisation rather than problem resolution. This condition is further exacerbated by social media algorithms that amplify extreme content and reduce the space for reflective dialogue (Ali et al., 2024).

Through this research, the researcher has referred to a verse from the Qur'an, which reads as follows:

"O you who have believed, let not a people ridicule [another] people; perhaps they may be better than them. And do not insult one another and do not call each other by [offensive] nicknames. Wretched is the name of disobedience after [one's] faith. And whoever does not repent then it is those who are the wrongdoers." (Surah Al-Hujurat 49:11)

Several communication scholars view this phenomenon as a form of disruption to healthy interpersonal communication. According to Joseph Walther (2002), in his Social Information Processing Theory, online communication requires

sufficient time and context to construct emotional meaning. However, social media platforms such as X often accelerate interactions and neglect deeper emotional nuances, resulting in miscommunication and interpersonal tensions. In the context of cancel culture, this dynamic makes individuals more susceptible to judgment without due clarification or comprehensive understanding.

On the other hand, this digital culture also generates significant emotional pressure on users. A study by the American Psychological Association ("Book Review: Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (Seventh Edition)," 2020) noted that exposure to extreme opinions and the expectation to consistently display positivity on social media contribute to heightened stress and anxiety, particularly among younger users. In the Indonesian context, where emotional expression is often framed within a collective cultural framework, this pressure becomes even more complex due to the societal demand to maintain a positive image and uphold social harmony even within virtual spaces.

The urgency of this research lies in the need to understand how the phenomenon of toxic positivity specifically, the tendency to reject negative emotions in favour of maintaining a continuously positive image affects the quality and meaning of interpersonal communication on the social media platform X, particularly within a digital culture heavily characterised by cancel culture practices. Amidst the dominance of rapid and reactive public opinion, toxic positivity can further cloud the dynamics of interaction by closing off spaces for emotional validation and critical reflection, thereby increasing the risks of miscommunication, social judgment, and psychological pressure among users. This study is crucial as an attempt to uncover the relationship between a culture of hyper-positive emotional expression and repressive social cancellation practices, while also offering a more comprehensive understanding of the state of digital communication health in contemporary society

Research by Flanagin dan A. J. (2023), underscores the duality of the toxic positivity phenomenon on social media, highlighting that while positive messages can provide temporary encouragement, they may also become obstacles to honest and reflective emotional expression. On platforms such as X, where public perception is rapidly formed and responded to en masse, excessively positive communication is often employed as a defence mechanism against criticism or social cancellation. Such responses, rather than fostering introspection and dialogue, tend to create superficial and inauthentic communication dynamics, further exacerbating individual psychological pressure. By emphasising that toxic positivity often serves as an avoidance strategy to evade confrontation, this study asserts that healthy interpersonal communication necessitates space for openly addressing negative emotions, particularly within the context of cancel culture, which demands accountability and honesty.

Study from Upadhyay, Srivatsa, and Mamidi (2022), complements this understanding from a technological perspective by developing a Natural Language

Processing (NLP)-based approach to detect content containing toxic positivity on social media. This research demonstrates that inauthentic positive encouragement can be identified through clichéd language patterns that overlook emotional complexity. In the midst of cancel culture, such detection techniques become highly relevant as they enable the identification of messages that appear supportive but, in reality, suppress acknowledgment of mistakes or pain. Thus, the NLP-based approach is not only significant for mapping more authentic dynamics of digital communication but also contributes to the creation of healthier and more empathetic online spaces, where emotional diversity can be recognised and addressed proportionally.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method to explore and deeply understand the dynamics of interpersonal communication on the social media platform X, particularly concerning the phenomena of toxic positivity and cancel culture. A qualitative approach was chosen as it allows for the capture of complex social realities that cannot be reduced merely to numbers or statistics. As explained by Weyant (2022), qualitative research relies on descriptive data in the form of written or spoken language that is interpreted contextually. In this context, the researcher acts as the main instrument directly involved in the data collection and analysis process, to reveal the hidden meanings in the digital interactions of social media users.

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To engage with the digital environment as the main field of study, this research adopts a netnographic approach. Netnography, as explained by Fenton and Parry(2023), is a suitable method for investigating the social and cultural practices that occur within online communities. This approach is employed to directly observe the interactions of netizens on the Media X platform, including conversations, comments, and content-sharing practices that reflect the dynamics of toxic positivity and cancel culture. The researcher conducted observations of digital communities, mapped emerging communication patterns, and documented relevant interactions for further analysis.

This study is also grounded in a critical paradigm, which views social media not merely as a communication tool but as a field where power, values, and social norms are reproduced. Through this paradigm, the researcher seeks to explore how toxic positivity and cancel culture not only impact individual emotional expression but also reinforce certain social dynamics that are often hegemonic.

The critical paradigm provides a framework for analysing power relations within digital communication and identifying opportunities for more inclusive and humane social transformation.

Primary data were collected through active observation of Media X users engaged in discussions or situations relevant to the research topic. Additionally, documentation such as screenshots and digital conversation recordings were gathered to provide deeper contextual understanding. This research also utilised Brand24 as a social media analysis tool to identify online discussions that reflect the phenomena of toxic positivity and cancel culture. Secondary data, including books, scholarly journals, and reportage articles, were employed to strengthen the analysis and provide a deeper theoretical framework. Interviews with experts in digital communication and social psychology were also conducted to enrich perspectives and validate the findings.

For data analysis, this study employs Krippendorff's version of content analysis as the primary technique. This method enables the researcher to identify themes, patterns, and hidden meanings behind digital interactions through coding and contextual interpretation.

The analysis process was conducted iteratively, beginning with data reduction, categorisation into thematic groups, and interpretation based on the theoretical framework. To ensure data validity, the researcher applied source and expert triangulation to maintain consistency and reliability of the collected data and to minimise subjective bias in interpretation. Through this methodology, the study aims to produce a comprehensive and critical understanding of how interpersonal communication on Media X is influenced by digital cultural pressures such as toxic positivity and cancel culture.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

The Dynamics of Cancel Culture on Media X

The phenomenon of cancel culture on Media X (formerly known as Twitter) has evolved into a complex form of digital social practice. Initially emerging as a form of collective solidarity against injustice or moral transgressions committed by public figures or institutions, cancel culture has now become an integral part of digital culture, enabling netizens to "judge" individuals en masse (Berryessa et al., 2023). Through features such as retweets, replies, and trending topics, Media X provides an extremely efficient infrastructure for the rapid dissemination of criticism, calls for boycotts, and the withdrawal of support all within a matter of hours, or even minutes.

In Indonesia, cancel culture is often triggered by sensitive issues such as religion, nationalism, gender, and Palestine. When a public figure or influencer is perceived to have violated social values whether through statements, actions, or affiliations netizens' responses can be brutal and massive(Strzelecka, 2023). For

instance, calls to boycott products or celebrities who fail to show concern for the Palestinian issue quickly spread through hashtags such as #Boikot or #Unfollow. This dynamic illustrates that the collective moral compass of the digital public is highly reactive and can serve as a powerful instrument of pressure, although it is not always proportional or just.

However, not all cancel culture practices are inherently repressive. In certain contexts, cancel culture can function as a new form of social control that demands accountability for power, privilege, and misconduct. Media X provides a space for marginalised groups to voice dissent against dominant narratives while simultaneously mobilising cross-community support. This movement can stimulate broader public conversations about digital ethics, representation, and social responsibility, although its execution often lacks recovery mechanisms for the individuals who are "cancelled."(Chen & Vanclay, 2020)

The primary issue with cancel culture on Media X is its tendency to produce instant judgment without context or space for clarification. An individual's digital footprint can be excavated and weaponised to construct cancellation narratives that do not always take into account personal transformation or original intent. In many cases, individuals subjected to cancel culture experience mental distress, job loss, and even physical threats. This phenomenon highlights that while Media X provides a space for free expression, it also harbours the potential for symbolic violence cloaked in public morality (Beabout et al., 2021).

The researcher conducted observations using the Brand24 analysis tool, as shown in the following table:

Table 1. Dynamics of Netizen Tweets on Media X

Account	Content	Context	Indicator
pmii_official	Boycott 25 global brands...	Boycott action against companies linked to the Palestine issue	Collective call for cancellation/boycott
lilaccountz	please don't stop boycotting...	Call to boycott global brands related to geopolitical issues	Strengthening the boycott narrative based on collective morality
u11ymohamad	why boycott/ban that auntie...	Criticism of public double standards in boycotting practices	Critique of cancellation based on social status
herricahyadi	Burger King becomes a boycott target...	Participation in the BDS boycott movement	Collective call against entities based on affiliation
SoftWarNews	Millions worldwide boycott a film...	Boycott of a Disney film due to an actor's political involvement	Boycott based on personal affiliation with certain entities

Source: Researcher's Observation (2025)

The posts in the table above illustrate how cancel culture has evolved into a powerful social communication strategy within Indonesia's digital ecosystem. Through calls to boycott brands, public figures, or institutions deemed morally or politically problematic, netizens demonstrate a form of collective solidarity rooted

in shared values. One notable example is the post by the account pmii_official, which called for a boycott of 25 global brands associated with the Palestinian issue. This call is not merely a form of digital activism but reflects political consciousness articulated through symbolic action in online spaces.

The post by lilaccountz demonstrates the reinforcement of the ongoing boycott narrative, with phrases such as "please don't stop boycotting...," signalling a call to maintain public pressure on entities perceived as geopolitically unethical. Such expressions reinforce cancel culture dynamics as not only reactive but also sustained collective movements, where netizens feel a moral obligation to "keep the fire" of cancellation alive as a form of social control over powerful entities.

Furthermore, the account u11ymohamad reveals another dimension of cancel culture criticism of public double standards. This post questions why some public figures are "cancelled" while others are not, depending solely on differences in social status or popularity. This indicates that, in practice, cancel culture also carries structural biases, where social power determines who is defended and who is condemned. Thus, cancel culture serves not only as a tool of pressure but also as a mirror of the inequalities in perception within digital society.

The post by herricahyadi highlighting Burger King as a boycott target reflects public involvement in global socio-economic-political movements, such as BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions). In this case, cancel culture transcends mere emotional public expressions and becomes part of the geopolitical strategy of digital citizens. This boycott narrative emphasises that digital spaces have become arenas for renegotiating values, identities, and the political positions of consumers who are increasingly aware of their influence on global systems.

The account SoftWarNews reports that millions worldwide are boycotting a Disney film due to the involvement of an actor associated with a particular political conflict. This demonstrates the global scale of cancel culture, which has surpassed national and cultural boundaries. Cancellation actions are no longer local phenomena but are now part of a transnational digital ecosystem where even an actor's personal affiliations can trigger mass boycotts. Such narratives reveal that personalisation within consumer culture has become a tool for cancellation based on identity politics.

Cancel culture in digital spaces is not merely a phenomenon of collective outrage but has developed into a structured expression of political, social, and moral positioning. It enables society to express ethical stances on global issues, while simultaneously raising challenges related to accountability, proportionality, and inequalities of power in determining who deserves to be cancelled.

Normalisation of Toxic Positivity in Digital Conversations: Between Emotional Support and Social Repression

In the era of fast-paced and concise digital communication, expressions of emotional support have undergone a shift in form. Phrases such as "stay strong," "don't give up," or "you can do it" have become standard expressions commonly encountered in online conversations, particularly when someone shares difficult or emotional experiences. Although intended as a form of care, such expressions often fail to reflect deep empathy towards the situation or emotions experienced by the interlocutor (Vassallo et al., 2023). This phenomenon is known as toxic positivity, referring to the tendency to impose an excessively positive outlook, thereby rejecting or dismissing legitimate negative emotions.

The normalisation of toxic positivity in digital conversations occurs due to a cultural drive to consistently appear composed, strong, and uncomplaining in public spaces. Social media has become the primary arena where narratives of success and happiness are showcased, while sadness, failure, and uncertainty are often deemed unworthy of display (Pierre, 2023). In this context, individuals who express sadness or vulnerability are often met with responses urging them to "stay strong" rather than being listened to or having their emotions validated. This reveals that generalised expressions of emotional support can potentially become a form of social repression against negative emotions.

One of the principal problems of toxic positivity lies in its rejection of vulnerability as a natural part of human experience. When individuals are experiencing grief, failure, or mental distress, what they need is a safe space to express those feelings without judgment. However, in a digital environment that excessively upholds a motivational spirit, expressions of pain are often quickly met with clichéd statements that fail to address the root of the issue. As a result, individuals may feel even more isolated, as their emotions are not acknowledged as important or are even regarded as signs of weakness (Marčić et al., 2023).

In addition to functioning as a form of psychological repression, toxic positivity also operates as a tool of social control (Fitouchi & Singh, 2022). When society pressures individuals to always think positively, it reinforces a cultural standard in which sadness, anger, or disappointment are deemed inappropriate to express. In the long term, the normalisation of this attitude risks eroding individuals' ability to recognise and process their emotions healthily. In some cases, the pressure to remain positive can even exacerbate existing mental health issues, as individuals are denied the space to process their emotions fully.

The researcher conducted observations using the Brand24 analysis tool, as shown in the following table:

Table 2. Netizen Tweets Related to Toxic Positivity

Account	Content	Context	Indicator
fangie.lombok	stay strong yaa...	Consoling Angie after returning from a competition	"Stay strong" phrase as denial of sadness
globaljubel_real	Stay strong, brother Skylar...	Motivational comment on a gaming content creator	Positive support phrase without addressing the issue contextually
erick.thohir	Stay strong supporting the National Team...	Supportive statement to national team supporters	Positive phrase used in the context of team performance
mars_societyy	stay strong and keep living...	Support for a public figure	Extreme positive phrase without addressing real conditions
fans_gsk811	stay strong, Ms Dyah...	Response to postnatal physical/emotional recovery	Encouragement without validating physical/emotional conditions

Source: Researcher's Observation (2025)

The table above illustrates how the phrase "stay strong" is frequently used in online interactions as a form of support. However, upon deeper examination, such phrases often reflect patterns of toxic positivity communication — the excessive encouragement to think positively that ultimately dismisses the validity of negative emotions. For example, in the context of someone who has failed in a competition, the use of such a phrase emphasises the denial of sadness rather than providing space for healthy emotional processing and acceptance.

Support directed at public figures or certain individuals, such as comments like "Stay strong, brother Skylar" or "Stay strong supporting the National Team," demonstrates a form of general, decontextualised motivation. Although these expressions appear positive on the surface, they fail to account for the emotional complexity or specific circumstances faced by the individuals. In healthy interpersonal communication, it is important to align empathy with context so that the support offered genuinely addresses the relevant emotional aspects.

One of the most extreme expressions is seen in the phrase "stay strong and keep living," which reflects a social demand for individuals to consistently appear strong and refrain from showing vulnerability. In certain conditions, the pressure to remain strong can become a psychological burden, as individuals may feel they have no space to express weakness or complain. Such expressions reveal how supportive phrases can transform into a denial of human vulnerability.

A similar pattern is observed in comments directed at someone who has just given birth and is in a fragile physical and emotional state. The phrase "stay strong, Ms Dyah..." fails to acknowledge the need for validation of pain, fatigue, and discomfort experienced postpartum. Such comments can reinforce the social narrative that strength is the only acceptable response, without offering space for rest or healthy emotional recovery.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the practices of toxic positivity and cancel culture in digital spaces are not merely individual expressions but form part of a complex and often contradictory social dynamic. Analysis of various posts reveals that phrases such as "stay strong" are used in diverse contexts, ranging from support for public figures to responses to personal hardships. Meanwhile, cancel culture is manifested through calls for boycotts of particular figures and entities as a form of collective moral and political response. These findings illustrate that social media is not only a medium for communication but also an arena for the negotiation of public values and morality, influenced by perception, emotion, and group dynamics.

Through triangulation of data from digital observation, screenshot documentation, and conversation analysis using Brand24, evidence was gathered showing that these two phenomena — toxic positivity and cancel culture coexist and reinforce one another in shaping the climate of digital communication. Brand24 data revealed spikes in the use of phrases such as "stay strong," "boycott," and "cancel" simultaneously with certain viral events. These findings are supported by the study of Flanagin & A. J. (2023), which emphasises that although toxic positivity appears to offer emotional support, it often remains superficial and represses complex emotions. Similarly, Upadhyay et al. (2022) demonstrate that the detection of toxic positivity in online communication helps to understand the emotional inequalities expressed publicly. Both studies reinforce the view that social interactions in digital spaces are now laden with symbolic meanings, manipulative tendencies, and the potential to disrupt healthy interpersonal communication.

Furthermore, the findings affirm that toxic positivity is not solely a psychological issue at the individual level but also reflects social pressure to consistently present a positive image in public spaces, even when individuals are experiencing emotional instability. Comments that dismiss sadness or fatigue in various posts show that digital culture still resists forms of emotional expression that do not align with the image of strength or happiness. This leads to the emergence of artificial communication, where individuals feel constrained from revealing their vulnerability for fear of being perceived as weak or emotionally immature.

Conversely, cancel culture operates within a broader framework of social power. It provides the public with a means to correct figures or institutions but simultaneously carries the risk of excessive and disproportionate cancellation. This phenomenon has become a form of digital social sanction driven by collective moral perception, yet not always grounded in clarification processes or communicative justice. In many cases, cancellation occurs without opportunities for recovery, creating a rigid and high-pressure communication ecosystem. Therefore, it is crucial to foster a more reflective and ethical digital awareness to

ensure that online spaces do not become arenas where individuals are left with only two options: to feign positivity or be mass-cancelled.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that the phenomena of toxic positivity and cancel culture form two opposing extremes in the dynamics of interpersonal communication on the Media X platform. Toxic positivity fosters social pressure for individuals to consistently present strength and positivity, thereby suppressing the space for negative emotional expression, which is essential for the healing process and meaningful communication. Meanwhile, cancel culture operates as a form of collective social control that is often repressive and disproportionate, creating a digital climate characterised by intense pressure, instant judgment, and a lack of restorative space. Although born from different motivations, both phenomena contribute to hindering the development of healthy, empathetic, and reflective communication within digital spaces.

Through the application of netnographic approaches and content analysis, this study underscores the importance of fostering critical awareness and emotional literacy in digital communication practices. Healthy communication is not merely about conveying positive messages or advocating for justice, but also about creating safe spaces for failure, sadness, and accountability. Therefore, platforms such as Media X must be understood not only as tools for expression but also as reflections of social relations and values that are continuously negotiated. A more ethical and humanistic communication approach is necessary to ensure that social media becomes.

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