

## **Cancel Culture Against Religious Leaders on TikTok: A Netnographic Analysis from the Perspective of the Mediatization of Religion and Islamic Moral Education**

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### **Abstract**

The cancel culture phenomenon against religious leaders on TikTok demonstrates a shift in how society assesses religious authority in the digital era, where visuals, short recordings, and algorithmic logic are more influential in determining public perception than the complete process of da'wah. The urgency of this research arose from the rise of controversial video clips ranging from the use of harsh diction, actions deemed inappropriate, to inconsistencies between advice and behavior which triggered moral condemnation and a wave of boycotts against certain religious leaders. This study aims to (1) identify the forms of behavior of religious leaders that trigger cancel culture, (2) describe the expression patterns of Indonesian netizens through stitches, duets, and comment sentiment, and (3) interpret these dynamics through Stig Hjarvard's Mediatization of Religion theory by placing Islamic morality as an ethical framework. The method used is netnography with a qualitative approach through observation of viral TikTok content, analysis of moral comments, and supporting literature related to digital da'wah and Islamic ethics. The results show that the wave of cancel culture is primarily triggered by violations of moral values such as impolite speech, unethical behavior, and sensational self-presentation. Netizens responded with open criticism, satire, and even calls for boycotts, amplified by TikTok's algorithm. This study concludes that religious authority in the digital space is increasingly tied to public perception, and that Islamic moral values remain a crucial standard for assessing the legitimacy of religious leaders in the social media era.

**Keywords:** cancel culture, digital religious authority, mediatization of religion, Islamic morals

### **Introduction**

Just a single video clip can shake a religious leader's reputation in a matter of seconds. This phenomenon demonstrates the swift and violent dynamics of public morality in the digital age. Social media is now not only a space for preaching, but also an arena for judgment, where netizens have the power to judge, criticize, and even dismiss religious figures before understanding the full context.

In recent times, negative perceptions of a number of Islamic preaching institutions in Indonesia have become increasingly pronounced. News about alleged moral violations by

Islamic boarding school administrators (Kurniawan, 2023), bullying practices within Islamic boarding schools (Antara, 2024), and attempts to delegitimize Islamic boarding schools as religious institutions have intensified critical sentiment within the community. This widespread public response demonstrates how digital opinion can rapidly shape collective perceptions, sometimes without considering the humanity of the figures in question (Anisa, 2020).

Meanwhile, the religious sphere has once again come under scrutiny with the emergence of religious figures who have gone viral due to their controversial preaching methods. This phenomenon has given rise to sharp polarization of opinion, particularly on platforms like TikTok. Various content creators produce material with negative sentiments, and some even encourage cancel culture as a form of criticism of religious leaders deemed inconsistent with preaching norms or public ethics.

The case of Gus Miftah is a clear example of how a humanist approach to preaching can be misunderstood. His activities with celebrities or at entertainment events were often cut short and went viral on social media. Many netizens considered his preaching style "too modern" or "out of line with tradition," leading to calls to discontinue his sermons. Yet, Gus Miftah emphasized the importance of preaching that embraces all levels of society, demonstrating humanity in conveying religious teachings (Khaer, 2025).

Meanwhile, the case of Gus Elham Yahya, whose video of him kissing young girls went viral, sparked an equally strong wave of cancel culture. The short video sparked angry comments and calls to stop attending his sermons. Some criticism focused on his gestures or appearance, rather than the content of his preaching, often overlooking the humanitarian aspects and good intentions of his efforts to educate the younger generation (Naufal, 2025).

These two cases demonstrate a pattern of netizen criticism that tends to be emotional and personal. Rather than prioritizing dialogue or clarification, criticism often diverts to the identity and character of religious figures. This deprives discussion spaces of morality and compassion, while marginalizing Islamic moral values such as *tabayyun* (respect), *rahmah* (grace), and *husnuzan* (forbearance).

The cancel culture phenomenon on social media demonstrates that the influence of the public in the digital world can now be as powerful as that of religious leaders. Short videos can shape public opinion, especially when algorithms promote viral content. Small mistakes,

if not properly explained, can easily be exaggerated and trigger negative public judgment, ultimately putting psychological pressure on religious leaders (Dermawan, 2024).

Stig Hjarvard's theory, The Mediatization of Religion, helps understand this situation: social media not only channels Islamic preaching but also shapes perceptions, assesses, and even tests the legitimacy of religious leaders. In the Indonesian context, religious leaders face a "digital public judge" whose operations differ from social norms or traditional religious structures (Krzysztof, 2023).

This situation demands a new approach to Islamic moral education, emphasizing not only personal aspects but also media ethics. Values such as *tabayyun* (religious observance), *adab* (good manners), *rahmah* (religious mercy), and caution in judging others must form the basis of digital literacy for the community. Criticism should be constructive, not destructive, and provide space for humane dialogue (Khaer, 2025).

This research aims to understand how religious leaders become targets of cancel culture on TikTok, how netizen reactions are shaped through videos, stitching, and comments, and how this phenomenon can be analyzed through the perspective of Islamic moral education and mediatization theory. This study is expected to contribute to creating more humane digital da'wah practices, while strengthening moral education in the face of social media pressures.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

This study uses a netnography method with a qualitative approach to understand the phenomenon of cancel culture against religious leaders on TikTok. Netnography was chosen because it can explore communication dynamics, digitally displayed religious practices, and public reaction patterns formed through algorithmic interactions. The researcher acts as an active observer, following the development of the issue, monitoring the spread of content, and examining netizens' moral responses while upholding Islamic moral principles such as caution, empathy, and etiquette in interpreting data.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study were TikTok users who responded to content about religious leaders through comments, stitches, duets, or other forms of digital expression. They were not recruited directly but observed through public activity on the platform. The religious leaders

studied are figures whose content has gone viral, generated debate, and fueled a wave of cancel culture. Individual identities are withheld to maintain ethics and privacy

### **Research Procedure**

The research procedures consisted of: (1) identifying viral TikTok content about religious leaders; (2) observing public interactions through comments, stitches, and duets; (3) manually documenting findings; and (4) categorizing behavioral patterns, public sentiment, and forms of cancel culture expression. The entire process was conducted through online observation utilizing TikTok's search feature, algorithmic recommendation pages (FYP), and hashtags related to the issue under study.

### **Data Collection Technique(s)**

Primary data was collected from TikTok video clips, stitches, duets, and public comments with high engagement. Content selection was based on virality, relevance to the cancel culture phenomenon, and the intensity of public response. Secondary data included journals, books, and scientific literature on cancel culture, the mediatization of religion, digital da'wah studies, and Islamic morality. All data was collected using online observation methods without automated download tools.

### **Data Analysis Technique**

The analysis was conducted using interpretive netnography, which involves reading interaction patterns, analyzing critical tendencies, and interpreting how the public frames the behavior of religious leaders through a moral lens. The findings were then interpreted using Stig Hjarvard's Mediatization of Religion theory to examine how media logic influences religious positions and authority. The Islamic moral perspective is used to examine the ethical aspects of the cancel culture phenomenon and the dynamics of digital da'wah.

## **Results**

### **Behavior of Religious Leaders Triggering a Wave of Cancel Culture on TikTok**

Netnographic observations indicate that the primary trigger for cancel culture is the actions of religious leaders deemed inconsistent with Islamic moral principles, particularly regarding politeness, politeness, role models, and maintaining the honor of oneself and others. In various TikTok videos, several religious leaders are seen using crude and vulgar language such as "suara desahan" "lont\*," "susu exp" or referring to other groups as "goblok" "tolol,"

"celeng wahabi." Other images show figures like Gus Jafar appearing topless while playing the guitar among the congregation, while others, like Gus Elham, drew criticism after being filmed kissing a small child on the cheek and inserting his cheek into the child's mouth behavior deemed by netizens to violate the boundaries of etiquette and moral sensitivity.

In addition to verbal and gestural aspects, the data also shows criticism of practices such as unvalidated claims of miracles, excessive tabarruk (prayer offerings), drinking water dipped in the fingers of religious figures, and even the assumption that certain objects possess spiritual powers without any basis in Islamic law. Misreadings of Quranic verses for example, a young habib's misreading of Surah Al-Lahab in one video also sparked criticism as they were deemed inappropriate for those in positions of religious authority.

From an Islamic moral perspective, these actions are considered contrary to the principles of *hifzh al-lisān* (guarding the tongue), *al-ḥayā'* (shyness), *wara'* (prudence), and *uswah ḥasanah* (exemplary conduct), thus triggering a public moral backlash. Netizens assessed that the role of religious leaders is not only related to their preaching abilities, but also to the moral worthiness demonstrated in their daily behavior, including in the digital space.

### **Patterns of Cancel Culture Expression by Indonesian Netizens in TikTok Content**

The patterns of cancel culture emerging from netizens are diverse and reflect a combination of moral outrage, algorithmic logic, and digital religious criticism. These forms of expression include:

a. Direct Condemnation Comments

Netizens openly expressed disappointment, criticism, and moral condemnation through comments such as:

“Mereka gak pantas disebut ustadz dan guz sat”

“Katanya si Pemuka agama, tapi melakukan pelecehan verbal dimuka umum”.

“ Astaghfirullah 😞😞 gitu kok ya masih dikasi panggung to”

“Boycote Miftah dari panggung apapun..buat malu agama dan bangsa”

Comments like these demonstrate that the public uses strong moral language as a form of social control over the behavior of religious figures.

b. Stitches, duets, and reaction videos

Netizens utilize TikTok's features to create reaction content, whether in the form of serious criticism, clarification, or satire. They take clips of videos of religious leaders deemed controversial and comment on them in short videos, maximizing the logic of the "For You Page" to make the reaction content go viral.

c. Parody, satire, and verbal mimicry

Instead of directly criticizing them, some netizens create imitative content that mocks the religious leaders' speaking style, expressions, or vulgar diction as a form of symbolic resistance. This style demonstrates how moral criticism is conveyed through the language of entertainment.

d. Calls for a digital boycott

Netizens take symbolic actions such as calling for people to stop watching, stop inviting them to the stage, or unfollow the accounts of certain figures. This is a new mechanism of social sanction in the virtual space.

While some netizen content stems from a desire to uphold moral values, such expressions often go beyond the pale. Criticism turns into harsh remarks, censure, or public judgment a practice that, in Islamic morals, contradicts the principles of *an-naṣīḥah bi al-rifq* (advising with gentleness), the prohibition of *tajrīḥ* (injuring honor), and the prohibition of *ghuluw* (excessive moral outrage). Thus, the pattern of cancel culture demonstrates the tension between the desire to correct deviations and the emotional tendencies triggered by media logic.

### **Interpretation of the Phenomenon through the Mediatization of Religion Perspective**

Analysis based on the Mediatization of Religion theory shows that TikTok has not only become a medium for spreading *da'wah* (Islamic preaching) but has reshaped the way religion is perceived and evaluated. TikTok's algorithm tends to promote the most sensational content, making short video clips depicting harsh words, inappropriate gestures, or minor mistakes by religious leaders more easily go viral than substantial *da'wah* content. In this context:

Religious authority becomes fragile, as it is judged not based on knowledge and long-term exemplary practices, but on viral visual performances; Religious leaders are "pulled" into following the logic of the media, so that their once-polite preaching style shifts to the style of

digital entertainment; The public becomes the determining factor in legitimacy, no longer just religious institutions. religious teachings or the chain of knowledge.

This phenomenon also shows that society judges religion based on visual representation, rather than substantial content. As a result, the reality of da'wah (preaching) is virtualized, simplified, and distorted, so that a small mistake in a 30-second video can erase a figure's reputation for years.

From an Islamic moral perspective, this phenomenon reminds us of the importance of caution for religious leaders in public appearances, as well as the importance of politeness for netizens in providing criticism. Both parties face a new ethical challenge: maintaining ethical values amidst a digital ecosystem that encourages speed, reactivity, and sensati

## **Discussion**

### **Definition of Cancel Cultur**

The term "cancel" comes from English, meaning to cancel a specific activity or action, while "culture" means culture. The combination of the two forms the term "cancel culture," which gained popularity in the early 2010s and refers to the practice of canceling, rejecting, or boycotting individuals or groups deemed to have engaged in controversial, unethical, or otherwise contrary to certain social values (Fallahnda, 2021). In Indonesian, this term is sometimes referred to as "cancellation culture." However, this translation is less commonly used, so people prefer to continue using the term "cancel culture" to describe the phenomenon of mass boycotts.

Generally, cancel culture is understood as the practice of imposing social sanctions in the form of boycotting and publicly shaming individuals, groups, or organizations for actions deemed wrong, deviant, or offensive to others (Wami, 2021). In the context of social media, cancel culture refers to a collective effort by netizens to punish an individual or institution by boycotting, attacking, or shaming them through platforms such as TikTok, Twitter, and others for behavior or speech deemed to violate social norms (Velasco, 2020).

The phenomenon of cancel culture on social media is influenced by various factors. One of these is social media's function as a means of imposing social sanctions on those deemed to have transgressed norms (Santoso, 2023). Furthermore, the power of social media to mobilize the masses allows the public to quickly act as "judges," "evaluators," and even

"executors" of individuals deemed to have committed wrongdoing. Other factors contributing to this phenomenon include:

1. Individualistic attitudes in the digital space, where users often disregard shared values and fail to consider the impact of their actions on others.
2. The use of social media to express negative sentiments, making the digital space often an arena for the formation of destructive public opinion and undermining social order and individual freedom.
3. A lack of internalization of digital ethical values, resulting in many actions on social media being carried out impulsively, following the crowd, or without considering the consequences for others.
4. A lack of reflective and in-depth thinking, which should help individuals be more careful, caring, and considerate of others in digital interactions.

By understanding these factors, it can be concluded that cancel culture emerges as a result of unethical and poorly directed digital interactions. Addressing this phenomenon requires a more reflective and contemplative mindset, allowing actions on social media to be more ethical and support freedom and shared well-being (Alfredo Kevin, 2023).

### **Behavior of Religious Leaders That Trigger Cancel Culture on TikTok**

The phenomenon of cancel culture against religious leaders on TikTok is inextricably linked to how these figures present themselves in a highly fluid public space controlled by media logic. Religious leaders are now not only communicators of religious teachings, but also actors interacting within an algorithmic system that demands visualization, speed of response, and easily consumed content. Under these pressures, some of their behavior or communication choices can be read as controversial (Renisyifa, 2022). For example, the use of language deemed too harsh, attitudes associated with particular political interests, or appearances on the entertainment stage deemed inconsistent with the moral role of a religious leader. Such behavior triggers a rapid and massive public response, as every action is recorded, reshared, and interpreted in thousands of different social contexts.

Furthermore, netizens hold religious leaders to a higher moral standard than other public figures. They not only assess the authenticity of their preaching but also demand consistency between their message, behavior, and appearance. Even the slightest discrepancy can cause the digital public to respond with intense intensity because they feel they have a

"moral right" to judge. This is evident in the increasing tendency of netizens to openly criticize, cite religious verses or arguments for legitimacy, and position themselves as "moral guardians" of the digital space. As a result, religious leaders are highly vulnerable to public interpretation, which sometimes fails to consider the context or original intent of their actions (Hermiza, 2022).

Furthermore, the digital space reinforces perceptual biases through algorithmic dissemination processes. For example, if a video clip is deemed controversial, the algorithm pushes it to a larger audience, triggering a larger wave of backlash. At this point, the behavior of religious leaders is no longer seen as individual acts, but as a representation of moral authority being tested. This process explains why cancel culture is so easily formed, as netizens interpret these actions not as minor mistakes but as deviations from the collective moral values they uphold. Thus, the behavior of religious leaders on TikTok becomes a tug-of-war between personal expression, public expectations, and the media structures that shape how they are perceived.

### **Cancel Culture Expression Patterns of Indonesian Netizens on TikTok**

Cancel culture expression patterns on TikTok demonstrate complex social dynamics involving the interaction between algorithms, comment culture, and netizens' need to establish a moral position in the digital space. Condemning comments are a key element shaping this cancel culture pattern. Netizens use morally charged language such as "inappropriate," "not the morals of a religious teacher," or "demeaning the dignity of religion," indicating that their arguments are often framed within indicators of Islamic morality. These comments serve not only as personal opinions but also as a way to build digital solidarity among those with similar views. When similar comments emerge massively, the atmosphere of cancel culture becomes stronger and more difficult to overcome with counter-narratives (Masita, 2025).

One important pattern discovered is the use of video stitches and duets as a form of direct, visual and emotional criticism. Netizens not only reiterate the mistakes of religious leaders but also provide new interpretations that influence how the public understands the issue. This format makes the cancel culture process participatory and dialogic: a narrative can evolve from a single video into hundreds of interwoven visual responses. TikTok provides a format that allows netizens to creatively construct arguments, for example by comparing sermon quotes, adding critical text, or inserting sarcastic humor to reinforce the intended

moral message. All of these forms of expression accelerate the spread of stigma against religious leaders in the spotlight.

Furthermore, the expression patterns of cancel culture on TikTok also demonstrate an element of collective affectivity, where emotions such as anger, disappointment, or betrayal fuel the spread of negative narratives. Netizens often position themselves as those hurt by the actions of religious leaders, then use the comment section as a means of moral recovery. This demonstrates that cancel culture is not simply a form of rejection, but also a process of negotiating the moral identity of digital society. TikTok, with its viral capacity, makes these emotions visible and contagious, thus strengthening the process of collective opinion formation. Thus, the expression patterns of cancel culture on TikTok are not only a social phenomenon, but also an affective one rooted in how netizens construct meaning and moral positions in their digital lives (Hermiza, 2025).

### **Interpreting Cancel Culture on Religious Leaders through the Mediatization of Religion Perspective (Hjarvard)**

From the perspective of the mediatization of religion, according to Stig Hjarvard, the phenomenon of cancel culture against religious leaders can be understood as evidence of the shift of religious authority into media logic. Social media, including TikTok, not only disseminates religious messages but also redefines how society understands and evaluates religious authority itself. Religious leaders no longer hold sole, institutionally based authority but must contend with public interpretations easily produced and distributed through the media. When they exhibit behavior deemed inconsistent with public expectations, the mediatization process positions them as objects of collective criticism. In this context, cancel culture becomes a digital mechanism for renegotiating the boundaries of religious leaders' moral authority (Strömbäck, 2008).

Furthermore, the mediatization process gives netizens a new role as actors who contribute to determining the validity of religious authority. Criticism, condemnation, and reframing of religious leaders' actions demonstrate that the public now has the symbolic power to assess and even undermine the legitimacy of a religious figure. This occurs because media logic places all actors on equal footing in the visual and discursive realm. A critique from an ordinary netizen can have greater impact than an official explanation from a religious institution if supported by algorithms. Through this process, mediatization not only changes

how religion is disseminated but also how its authority is constructed and undermined (Mueller, 2021).

Ultimately, cancel culture, from a mediatization perspective, can be read as a reflection of the transformation of society's relationship with religious authorities. Netizens no longer passively accept the authority of religious leaders but actively assess, correct, and even exercise a moral oversight function. Religious leaders are forced to understand that the digital space is not merely a place for preaching, but a social terrain that demands sensitivity, caution, and mediative competence. Thus, the phenomenon of cancel culture demonstrates how religion is undergoing a process of recontextualization in digital media, where religious authority is no longer stable but always open to questioning, negotiation, and reshaping according to public dynamics.

### **Conclusion**

This research shows that the cancel culture phenomenon against religious leaders emerges as a result of a complex interaction between the behavior of religious leaders, public moral expectations, and TikTok's algorithmic logic. The findings confirm that religious authority no longer rests solely on institutional grounds but is heavily influenced by public sensitivity to religious leaders' digital performances. In a space that demands rapid response and high visualization, even small mistakes or expressions deemed inappropriate can quickly lead to a wave of condemnation.

Through netnographic analysis, this research found that the patterns of cancel culture expressed by Indonesian netizens are emotional, participatory, and framed through religious moral standards. Netizens utilize comments, stitch features, duets, and content reproduction to construct a collective narrative that emphasizes rejection of certain religious figures. This demonstrates that cancel culture is not simply a spontaneous reaction but a form of public moral negotiation in shaping the image of religious leaders in the digital space.

From the perspective of the mediatization of religion, this research asserts that the media has taken over some of the functions of religious authority by positioning the public as the arbiter of moral legitimacy. Religious authority has become fluid and dependent on public

interpretations shaped by the algorithmic dynamics of social media. Thus, cancel culture serves as a new mechanism for society to assess, correct, and even discipline religious leaders.

This research also emphasizes the relevance of Islamic moral education as an ethical framework for addressing this phenomenon. Values such as caution, empathy, media etiquette, and respect for human dignity are crucial for both religious leaders and netizens to implement to create a more humane and civilized digital space.

This research's limitations lie in its focus solely on TikTok and a specific data period. Further research is recommended to expand cross-platform comparisons, integrate mixed methods approaches, and examine the long-term impact of the cancel culture phenomenon on religious authority. Overall, this research provides theoretical and practical contributions to understanding the transformation of religious authority in the digital era while reinforcing the urgency of Islamic moral education as a foundation for media ethics.

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