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VISUAL RHETORIC OF CANCELLATION: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL CALLOUT DESIGN AND PUBLIC OPINION FORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

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ABSTRAK

Cancel culture merupakan fenomena budaya digital kontemporer yang tidak hanya bersifat linguistik, tetapi juga sangat visual: ia beroperasi melalui produksi, sirkulasi, dan konsumsi artefak visual berupa meme, callout graphic, infografis tuduhan, serta desain tipografi provokator yang tersebar masif di platform media sosial. Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana elemen-elemen desain komunikasi visual, khususnya retorika visual, semiotika, dan estetika tipografi, berfungsi sebagai instrumen pembentukan opini publik digital dalam konteks cancel culture. Menggunakan pendekatan analisis semiotika visual berbasis kerangka Roland Barthes (denotasi, konotasi, mitos) dan retorika visual Foss, dipadukan dengan analisis desain berbasis multimodal, penelitian ini menganalisis 48 artefak visual yang terkait dengan kasus cancel culture viral di Twitter/X dan Instagram pada periode 2023 hingga 2025. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa desain visual dalam cancel culture bekerja melalui tiga mekanisme utama: (1) konstruksi visual identitas moral melalui pemilihan tipografi, skema warna, dan komposisi yang bersifat menghakimi; (2) amplifikasi retorik melalui estetika meme yang memanfaatkan kode budaya visual bersama; dan (3) naturalisasi ideologi kelompok melalui mekanisme mitos visual yang menjadikan narasi pembatalan tampak sebagai kebenaran yang sewajarnya. Artikel ini berkontribusi pada wacana desain komunikasi visual tentang relasi antara estetika digital, produksi makna, dan kekuasaan sosial dalam ekosistem media kontemporer.

Kata kunci: cancel culture, retorika visual, semiotika desain, komunikasi visual digital, opini publik

ABSTRACT

Cancel culture is a contemporary digital cultural phenomenon that operates not only through language but also, and centrally, through visual communication: it functions via the production, circulation, and consumption of visual artifacts, including memes, callout graphics, accusatory infographics, and provocative typographic designs disseminated massively across social media platforms. This article examines how elements of visual communication design, particularly visual rhetoric, semiotics, and typographic aesthetics, function as instruments of digital public opinion formation within the context of cancel culture. Employing a visual semiotic approach grounded in Roland Barthes's framework of denotation, connotation, and myth, combined with Foss's visual rhetoric theory and multimodal design analysis, this study analyzes 48 visual artifacts associated with viral cancel culture cases on Twitter/X and Instagram during the period 2023 to 2025. Findings demonstrate that visual design in cancel culture operates through three primary mechanisms: (1) the visual construction of moral identity through the strategic selection of typography, color schemes, and compositional arrangements that encode judgment; (2) rhetorical amplification through meme aesthetics that exploit shared visual cultural codes; and (3) the naturalization of group ideology through visual myth mechanisms that render cancellation narratives as self-evident truths. This article contributes to the discourse of visual communication design concerning the relationship between digital aesthetics, meaning production, and social power within contemporary media ecosystems.

Keyword: cancel culture, visual rhetoric, design semiotics, digital visual communication, public opinion

INTRODUCTION

The rapid proliferation of social media platforms has fundamentally reshaped the visual landscape of public discourse. Among the most consequential developments within this landscape is the emergence of cancel culture: a collective digital practice wherein communities mobilize to publicly denounce, ostracize, or damage the reputation of individuals or organizations perceived to have violated prevailing moral or social norms (Clark, 2020; Ng, 2022). While extensive scholarship has examined cancel culture through the lenses of communication studies, social psychology, and political theory, a critical dimension of the phenomenon has received comparatively little systematic attention: its profoundly visual character. Cancel culture does not operate through language alone; it operates through design.

The visual artifacts produced and circulated during cancel culture campaigns constitute a distinct and analytically rich category of visual communication. Callout graphics, accusatory memes, typographic shaming posts, and viral infographics function not merely as supplementary illustrations to textual argument but as primary rhetorical instruments that construct moral judgments, mobilize collective emotion, and shape the formation of digital public opinion. These artifacts deploy specific design choices, including typography, color, layout, iconography, and compositional hierarchy, to produce meaning that operates simultaneously at the level of denotation, connotation, and what Barthes (1977) termed myth: the naturalization of ideologically constructed meanings as self-evident truths.

From the perspective of visual communication design, cancel culture presents a set of urgent analytical questions. What design conventions and aesthetic codes characterize the visual artifacts of cancellation? How do typographic choices, color schemes, and compositional strategies encode moral judgment and construct the identity of the accused? How does the aesthetic logic of the meme format amplify or constrain the rhetorical force of callout content? And how do these visual mechanisms contribute to the formation of digital public opinion in ways that exceed or differ from purely textual communication? These questions sit squarely at the intersection of visual rhetoric, design discourse, and the sociology of digital culture, all of which fall within the scope of CHESTER's editorial focus on design discourse, art sociology, conceptual culture, and visual communication design.

The significance of this inquiry is threefold. Theoretically, it extends the application of visual rhetoric and semiotic theory to a novel and socially significant domain of digital visual culture, demonstrating the explanatory power of design-centered analytical frameworks for understanding contemporary social phenomena. Practically, it illuminates the ways in which design decisions carry ethical and social consequences in digital public life, with direct relevance for visual communication practitioners working in digital contexts. Contextually, it addresses a demonstrable gap in the literature: while studies of cancel culture are proliferating rapidly (Brady et al., 2023; Keohane, 2024; Rahmawati and Hapsari, 2024), virtually none approach the phenomenon from the perspective of visual communication design or apply semiotic and rhetorical frameworks developed within design studies.

Prior scholarship on the visual dimensions of digital culture has examined political memes (Milner and Wolff, 2023), protest graphics (Mascarenhas et al., 2024), and social media branding aesthetics (Setiawardhani, 2024), but has not systematically addressed the specific visual grammar of cancel culture artifacts. Existing cancel culture studies that mention visual elements tend to treat them as incidental rather than constitutive. This study addresses that gap by placing visual design at the center of the analysis.

The novelty of this article lies in three contributions: (1) applying Barthes's semiotic framework alongside Foss's visual rhetoric theory specifically to cancel culture visual artifacts, producing the first design-centered analytical framework for this phenomenon; (2) identifying a distinctive visual grammar of cancellation, comprising recurring typographic, chromatic, and compositional conventions that function as a recognized design code within digital cancel culture communities; and (3) theorizing the concept of punitive visual design: the deployment of design conventions to render moral condemnation aesthetically persuasive and culturally naturalized.

This study is guided by two research questions: (1) What visual design conventions, including typographic, chromatic, and compositional strategies, characterize the visual artifacts produced and circulated during cancel culture campaigns on social media platforms? (2) How do these visual design conventions function rhetorically and semiotically to construct moral identities and shape digital public opinion? The objectives are: (1) to identify and describe the visual grammar of cancel culture design artifacts; (2) to analyze the semiotic and rhetorical mechanisms through which these artifacts produce moral meaning; and (3) to theorize the relationship between visual design aesthetics and the formation of digital public opinion in the context of cancel culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cancel Culture as Visual Communication Phenomenon

Cancel culture, also referred to as call-out culture, denotes the collective practice whereby online communities organize to publicly denounce and ostracize individuals or entities perceived to have violated shared moral or social norms (Clark, 2020; Ng, 2022). While canonical definitions of cancel culture emphasize its social and discursive dimensions, a growing body of scholarship recognizes that the phenomenon is fundamentally mediated through visual artifacts. Keohane (2024) demonstrates that cancel culture rhetoric operates through specific communicative strategies that

position the accused and the accusing community in clearly defined moral roles; this positioning is accomplished as much through visual design as through verbal argument.

The visual artifacts of cancel culture, including memes, callout graphics, screenshot compilations, and typographic shaming posts, constitute what Milner and Wolff (2023) describe as participatory media: forms of visual communication that are designed not merely to convey information but to invite replication, modification, and redistribution. The design conventions of these artifacts are therefore not incidental stylistic choices but functional components of a rhetorical system engineered for virality, emotional impact, and moral persuasion. Understanding cancel culture thus requires understanding its visual communication design: the aesthetic codes, compositional conventions, and semiotic strategies that make its artifacts recognizable, shareable, and rhetorically effective.

Visual Rhetoric: Theory and Application to Digital Culture

Visual rhetoric, as theorized by Foss (2004) and further developed by Hill and Helmers (2012), refers to the study of how visual artifacts produce meaning and exert persuasive force. Visual rhetoric holds that images, designs, and visual compositions are not merely illustrative of arguments made in language but are themselves arguments: they make claims, marshal evidence, exploit emotional appeals, and construct the ethos of both the image-maker and the subject represented. Applied to digital culture, visual rhetoric provides a framework for analyzing how design choices in social media content function as rhetorical acts with measurable social consequences.

Recent scholarship has demonstrated the explanatory power of visual rhetoric for understanding politically charged digital visual culture. Studies of political memes have shown that the juxtaposition of image and text, the exploitation of established visual formats, and the manipulation of typographic conventions constitute a sophisticated visual argumentative practice that operates independently of and often more powerfully than verbal argument alone (Milner and Wolff, 2023; Mascarenhas et al., 2024). Multimodal discourse analysis, which examines the interaction of visual, textual, and spatial elements in composite artifacts, has further enriched the toolkit available for analyzing these phenomena (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2021). This study draws on both traditions to analyze cancel culture artifacts as multimodal visual arguments.

Roland Barthes and the Semiotics of Visual Culture

Roland Barthes's semiotic framework, developed across his seminal works *Mythologies* (1957) and *Image, Music, Text* (1977), provides the theoretical foundation for this study's analysis of how cancel culture visual artifacts produce meaning. Barthes distinguished three levels of signification. Denotation refers to the literal, surface-level meaning of a visual sign: the actual image or text visible in an artifact. Connotation refers to the culturally and emotionally loaded meanings associated with those signs, meanings that vary across cultural contexts and are activated through the viewer's cultural competence. Myth, Barthes's most theoretically powerful concept, refers to the process by which historically contingent, ideologically constructed meanings are naturalized: made to appear inevitable, universal, and self-evident rather than constructed and contestable.

Applied to cancel culture visual design, Barthes's framework reveals how artifacts that appear to be straightforward denunciations of specific wrongdoing are in fact complex semiotic constructions that embed particular ideological positions, activate culturally specific emotional responses, and naturalize particular frameworks of moral judgment as commonsense. Setiawardhani (2024) has demonstrated the relevance of Barthesian semiotics for analyzing contemporary digital visual artifacts, particularly in the analysis of how design conventions encode brand identity and social meaning. This study extends that analytical approach to the domain of cancel culture.

Typography, Color, and Composition as Rhetorical Instruments

Within visual communication design, typography, color, and compositional arrangement are recognized as primary carriers of connotative and rhetorical meaning. Typography, as Bringhurst (2019) argues, is not a neutral conveyor of linguistic content but an expressive system in which the selection of typefaces, weights, spacing, and hierarchical arrangement encodes emotional tone, cultural association, and relational positioning between elements. Bold sans-serif typefaces conventionally connote urgency, authority, and contemporary relevance; distressed or handwritten typefaces evoke authenticity and emotional intensity; red typography in Western visual conventions activates associations with danger, urgency, and transgression.

Color semiotics in digital design operates through both universal psychophysiological responses and culturally specific codes. Research in visual communication design consistently demonstrates that chromatic choices in digital content significantly influence the perceived credibility, emotional valence, and moral framing of the message conveyed (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2021). Compositional arrangement, including the use of visual hierarchy, framing, contrast, and the strategic placement of textual and visual elements, further shapes how viewers process and respond to visual content. These design variables do not operate in isolation; they constitute an integrated visual grammar that produces meaning through their systematic combination and mutual reinforcement.

Meme Aesthetics and the Visual Grammar of Viral Design

The internet meme constitutes the dominant visual format through which cancel culture content is produced and circulated. Milner and Wolff (2023) define memes as units of participatory visual culture characterized by iterability: the capacity to be reproduced, modified, and recombined in ways that preserve core structural and semantic features while adapting to new contexts. The meme format has developed a distinctive aesthetic grammar, including the characteristic

combination of photographic or illustrated imagery with overlaid bold text, the exploitation of established visual templates, and the compression of complex social arguments into single, immediately legible visual compositions.

Mascarenhas et al. (2024) demonstrate that the argumentative power of image memes derives partly from what they term the epistemic break: memes gain credibility not through citation of authoritative sources but through the shared cultural codes and emotional resonances embedded in their visual conventions. Applied to cancel culture, this observation suggests that the persuasive force of cancellation artifacts resides substantially in their design: the familiar aesthetic conventions of the callout graphic or shaming meme activate a recognition response in viewers that pre-disposes them toward accepting the moral framing embedded in the artifact before engaging with its specific claims.

Research Gap and Theoretical Position

The convergence of these theoretical traditions, visual rhetoric, Barthesian semiotics, typographic theory, and meme aesthetics, provides a robust analytical framework for understanding cancel culture as a visual communication phenomenon. However, no prior study has synthesized these frameworks specifically for the analysis of cancel culture visual artifacts, and no study within the field of visual communication design has examined cancel culture as an object of design discourse analysis. This study fills that gap, positioning itself at the productive intersection of design studies, visual culture theory, and the sociology of digital media.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design and Approach

This study employs a qualitative research design combining visual semiotic analysis and visual rhetoric analysis, organized within an overarching framework of multimodal discourse analysis (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2021). This methodological combination is appropriate for the research objectives for three reasons. First, the primary data are visual artifacts, making design-focused analytical frameworks more appropriate than text-centered approaches. Second, the research questions concern meaning production mechanisms that operate at multiple semiotic levels simultaneously, requiring a framework capable of analyzing denotative, connotative, and mythological dimensions of visual meaning. Third, the study's theoretical orientation toward visual communication design necessitates analytical tools developed within and for design studies rather than imported wholesale from adjacent disciplines.

The visual semiotic analysis follows Barthes's three-level framework of denotation, connotation, and myth, adapted for digital visual artifacts following Setiawardhani (2024) and Mascarenhas et al. (2024). The visual rhetoric analysis applies Foss's (2004) framework for identifying the nature and function of visual arguments, examining how design choices construct ethos, pathos, and logos in visual form. Multimodal analysis, following Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021), examines the interaction of typographic, chromatic, iconographic, and compositional elements as an integrated semiotic system.

Data Collection and Sampling

The primary data corpus comprises 48 visual artifacts collected from Twitter/X and Instagram during the period January 2023 through December 2025. Visual artifacts were defined as discrete image-based posts, including static graphics, screenshot compositions, and typographic posts, that were directly associated with cancel culture campaigns targeting identifiable individuals or organizations. Artifacts were eligible for inclusion only if they were publicly posted, received a minimum of 5,000 engagement interactions within 72 hours of posting, and contained identifiable design elements amenable to semiotic and rhetorical analysis.

Purposive sampling was employed to ensure representation across four categories of cancel culture visual artifact: meme-format callout posts, typographic accusation graphics, screenshot-based evidence compilations, and community-produced infographic summaries. Within each category, artifacts were selected to represent variation in platform, target identity, and thematic content. The 48-artifact corpus was determined by the principle of theoretical saturation: sampling continued until no new design conventions, semiotic strategies, or rhetorical patterns were emerging from newly collected artifacts. All personally identifying information for private individuals was removed from the analytical presentation; only publicly available artifacts featuring public figures or institutional subjects are cited by reference in this article.

Analytical Procedure

Each artifact was analyzed through a three-stage procedure. In the first stage, visual description, each artifact was systematically documented according to a standardized protocol recording: typographic elements

including font family, weight, size hierarchy, and color; chromatic elements including dominant hues, contrast ratios, and color combinations; compositional elements including layout structure, visual hierarchy, framing, and the spatial relationship between text and image; and iconographic elements including symbols, logos, and culturally specific visual references. In the second stage, semiotic analysis, each artifact was analyzed according to Barthes's three levels, identifying denotative elements, connotative associations, and mythological structures operating within the design. In the third stage, rhetorical analysis, each artifact was evaluated according to Foss's visual rhetoric framework, identifying the specific rhetorical claims made through design choices and the emotional and logical appeals deployed.

Cross-artifact analysis proceeded through iterative coding and pattern identification across the corpus. Recurring design conventions were identified and grouped into analytical categories representing the primary mechanisms of cancel culture visual design. Negative case analysis, the deliberate search for artifacts that did not conform to emerging patterns, was employed throughout to test and refine the analytical categories.

Validity and Reliability

Analytical validity was ensured through triangulation across three analytical frameworks, semiotic, rhetorical, and multimodal, such that findings that emerged from multiple analytical perspectives were accorded greater evidential weight than those supported by a single framework alone. Inter-rater reliability was established by having an independent visual communication design researcher code a 25% subsample of the corpus using the same analytical protocol, achieving a Cohen's Kappa coefficient of 0.79, indicating strong agreement. Member checking was conducted with two design practitioners experienced in digital visual communication, who reviewed preliminary findings and confirmed their alignment with professional design knowledge and practice.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Finding 1: The Visual Grammar of Moral Condemnation

Analysis of the 48-artifact corpus reveals a highly consistent and recognizable visual grammar of cancel culture design, constituting what this study terms the aesthetics of moral condemnation. This visual grammar operates through the systematic deployment of specific typographic, chromatic, and compositional conventions that function together to encode moral judgment in visual form. At the typographic level, the dominant convention across the corpus involves the use of heavy sans-serif typefaces, particularly bold and extra-bold weights, in uppercase lettering, with high-contrast placement against dark or vividly colored backgrounds. This typographic convention produces a visual rhetoric of urgency and authority: the visual equivalent of a raised voice or an institutional proclamation. The specific associations activated, including urgency, seriousness, and non-negotiable assertion, are culturally encoded in the typographic conventions of warning signs, legal notices, and official declarations, conventions that cancel culture design deliberately exploits to position its accusations as similarly authoritative and objectively warranted.

At the chromatic level, the corpus reveals a striking dominance of two primary color schemes. The first involves combinations of red, black, and white, a triad that activates connotations of danger, transgression, and moral alarm established through long cultural usage in warning and alarm systems. The second involves the selective colorization of specific elements, including the name or image of the accused subject, against otherwise neutral or dark backgrounds, creating a focal point that functions rhetorically to mark the accused as the singular source of moral contamination. Both color strategies constitute what Barthes would identify as operating at the connotative level: they produce culturally specific emotional responses that predispose the viewer toward accepting the moral framing before engaging analytically with the content. This finding extends the established literature on color semiotics in visual design (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2021) to a socially consequential domain of digital visual culture.

Finding 2: Meme Aesthetics as Rhetorical Amplification

The second major finding concerns the specific rhetorical function of meme aesthetics in cancel culture visual design. Analysis of the meme-format artifacts in the corpus, which constituted 58% of the total sample, reveals that the meme format performs a specific and identifiable rhetorical function that exceeds mere format convention: it operates as a mechanism of rhetorical amplification that dramatically increases the persuasive

force of the cancellation message by embedding it within a recognizable visual grammar of collective cultural participation.

The meme format achieves this amplification through three design mechanisms. First, template exploitation: cancel culture memes frequently adapt established, widely recognized visual templates, including the drake pointing meme, the distracted boyfriend format, and the expanding brain sequence, to embed moral condemnation within visual structures that carry pre-existing emotional and argumentative associations. The familiarity of the template functions as an implicit endorsement of the argument structure embedded within it: because the viewer has encountered the template used approvingly in countless previous contexts, its redeployment for cancellation purposes transfers that positive association to the cancellation message. This mechanism constitutes a sophisticated form of visual intertextuality that operates independently of the verbal content overlaid on the template.

Second, aesthetic democratization: the meme format's deliberately low-fidelity aesthetic, characterized by compressed image quality, overlaid text using platform-native fonts, and minimal production values, functions rhetorically to position cancel culture artifacts as authentic grassroots expressions of collective moral judgment rather than as produced, strategic communications. This aesthetic positioning is itself a design choice: the low-fidelity look is in most cases deliberately cultivated rather than incidentally produced, functioning as what Barthes would identify as a connotative sign that naturalizes the ideological positioning of the artifact as spontaneous, authentic collective expression. This finding aligns with and extends Mascarenhas et al.'s (2024) analysis of the epistemic function of meme aesthetics.

Third, iconographic compression: meme-format cancel culture artifacts achieve a degree of argumentative compression that would be impossible in purely verbal form. Complex moral accusations involving contextual nuance, contested evidence, and competing interpretations are routinely compressed into single-image compositions of approximately 1080 by 1080 pixels that present the moral verdict as a simple, visually immediate, and emotionally unambiguous conclusion. This compression is not merely a communicative convenience but a rhetorical strategy: it forecloses the cognitive space necessary for critical evaluation of the underlying argument, substituting visual immediacy and emotional impact for deliberative assessment. The design choice to compress rather than elaborate is itself a moral argument: it visually asserts that the case against the accused is sufficiently clear that it requires no elaboration.

Finding 3: Visual Myth and the Naturalization of Moral Judgment

The third and theoretically most significant finding concerns the operation of Barthesian myth in cancel culture visual design. Across the corpus, a consistent pattern emerges in which the design conventions of cancel culture artifacts function to naturalize specific frameworks of moral judgment, rendering ideologically constructed positions as self-evident truths that require no defense or argument. This naturalization process constitutes the mythological dimension of cancel culture visual design: the level at which the semiotic work of the artifact is most consequential for the formation of digital public opinion.

The primary mechanism of this mythological operation is what this study terms visual moral essentialism: the use of design conventions to represent specific transgressive actions as evidence of the essential moral character of the accused rather than as discrete behaviors subject to contextual interpretation. This is accomplished compositionally through the consistent use of full-face photographic portraits of the accused, cropped and framed to emphasize facial expression, typically accompanied by accusatory text that functions as a caption anchoring the image's moral meaning in Barthes's sense. The compositional convention of portrait-plus-accusation anchors the viewer's interpretation of the portrait within a moral framework that transforms the depicted individual from a person with complex motives and context into a visual signifier of the transgression named in the accompanying text.

This finding has significant implications for design discourse. It demonstrates that design conventions familiar from legitimate visual communication contexts, including the use of portrait photography to humanize subjects and typographic hierarchy to organize information, can be systematically repurposed to serve punitive rhetorical functions. The design knowledge embedded in cancel culture visual production thus represents a form of applied visual rhetoric that operates largely below the threshold of conscious audience awareness: viewers respond to the naturalized moral framing produced by the artifact's design without necessarily

recognizing that they are responding to design choices rather than to self-evident moral truths. This is precisely the operation of myth as Barthes theorized it, and its identification in the context of cancel culture visual design constitutes a substantive contribution to both design discourse and visual culture studies.

Discussion: Punitive Visual Design and Its Implications for Design Discourse

Synthesizing the three findings above, this study proposes the concept of punitive visual design as a theoretically productive category for understanding a significant and growing domain of digital visual communication. Punitive visual design refers to the systematic application of visual communication design conventions to produce artifacts whose primary function is the public infliction of reputational damage through aesthetically persuasive moral condemnation. The concept is analytically distinct from propaganda, advertising, or protest graphics, though it shares features with all three: like propaganda, it naturalizes ideological positions through visual conventions; like advertising, it optimizes visual impact for maximum persuasive effect; like protest graphics, it mobilizes collective moral feeling through participatory visual production.

The concept of punitive visual design carries implications for design discourse that extend well beyond the specific context of cancel culture. If the design conventions developed within visual communication design for legitimate communicative purposes, including the rhetorical use of typography, the semiotic coding of color, and the argumentative compression of compositional arrangement, can be systematically deployed for punitive social functions, then visual communication design as a discipline bears a responsibility to develop critical frameworks for recognizing and evaluating these applications. Keohane (2024) has demonstrated that cancel culture rhetoric functions as a form of image repair strategy for those claiming cancellation status; this study demonstrates that it simultaneously functions as a form of image destruction strategy for those targeted by cancellation, executed through the systematic deployment of design knowledge.

This study's findings also contribute to the understanding of how visual design mediates the relationship between aesthetic judgment and moral judgment in digital culture. The consistent patterning of design conventions across the cancel culture artifact corpus suggests that a recognizable visual code of moral condemnation has been collectively developed and stabilized within digital cancel culture communities, functioning as a shared visual language that both enables rapid communication and constrains the range of moral positions that can be aesthetically expressed within it. This observation extends the design sociology literature on visual culture and collective meaning-making (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2021) to a domain with significant social consequences

IMPLICATIONS

For Visual Communication Design Practice

For visual communication design practitioners, the findings of this study have direct professional relevance. They demonstrate that the design conventions taught and applied within visual communication design education, including the rhetorical use of typography, color semiotics, and compositional hierarchy, have documented applications in contexts where their social consequences are potentially harmful. Design practitioners working in digital media should be equipped with critical frameworks for recognizing when design conventions are being applied to punitive rather than communicative ends, and should be prepared to engage with the ethical dimensions of the visual systems they create and circulate. The concept of punitive visual design developed in this study provides a vocabulary for precisely this kind of critical professional reflection.

For Visual Communication Design Education

For design educators, the study's findings suggest the productive integration of visual culture criticism and design ethics into visual communication design curricula. Students who understand how typographic, chromatic, and compositional conventions encode moral judgment, and how meme aesthetics function as rhetorical amplification mechanisms, are better equipped both to deploy design conventions responsibly and to analyze and critique the visual artifacts they encounter in digital public life. The visual semiotic and rhetorical frameworks applied in this study offer pedagogically accessible analytical tools for this kind of critical design literacy.

For Digital Platform Policy

For digital platform operators and policymakers, this study's demonstration that cancel culture operates substantially through specifically designed visual artifacts suggests that content moderation approaches focused primarily on textual content are insufficient to address the full range of harms associated with cancel culture. The visual grammar of cancellation identified in this study, including its characteristic typographic, chromatic, and compositional conventions, could in principle inform the development of visual content moderation tools capable of identifying punitive design artifacts before their reach achieves the amplification levels necessary for reputational damage. The findings also underscore the importance of algorithmic transparency, since the amplification of visual content through engagement-based recommendation systems directly accelerates the rhetorical reach of cancel culture visual artifacts.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that cancel culture is not only a social and communicative phenomenon but a profoundly visual one: it operates substantially through the production, circulation, and reception of visual artifacts that deploy established visual communication design conventions for punitive rhetorical purposes. Through visual semiotic analysis grounded in Barthes's framework of denotation, connotation, and myth, combined with Foss's visual rhetoric theory and multimodal design analysis applied to a corpus of 48 cancel culture visual artifacts from Twitter/X and Instagram, this study has identified three primary mechanisms of cancel culture visual design: the construction of moral identity through typography, color, and composition; rhetorical amplification through meme aesthetics; and the naturalization of moral judgment through visual myth. These three mechanisms together constitute what this study terms punitive visual design: the systematic application of visual communication design conventions to aesthetically persuasive moral condemnation.

The theoretical contribution of this study is threefold. First, it extends the application of Barthesian semiotics and visual rhetoric theory to a novel and socially significant domain of digital visual culture, demonstrating the continued explanatory power of these frameworks for contemporary phenomena. Second, it identifies and describes a recognizable visual grammar of cancellation that constitutes a shared visual code within digital cancel culture communities. Third, it proposes the concept of punitive visual design as a productive analytical category for design discourse that has applications beyond the specific context of cancel culture. These contributions position the study at the intersection of visual communication design, visual culture theory, and the sociology of digital media, consistent with CHESTER's editorial focus on design discourse, art sociology, and conceptual culture.

Practically, the study contributes to design practitioners, educators, and platform policymakers by providing a vocabulary and analytical framework for recognizing, critically evaluating, and responding to the deployment of visual design conventions in punitive social contexts. In a digital environment in which visual artifacts are increasingly central to the formation of public opinion, the capacity to analyze the design dimensions of those artifacts is no longer a specialized academic competence but a necessary component of visual communication literacy for practitioners and citizens alike.

This study acknowledges several limitations. The corpus, while systematically sampled, is bounded by platform availability and the researcher's cultural and linguistic competence; cancel culture visual artifacts produced in languages other than English and Indonesian may exhibit design conventions not captured in the analysis. The study's qualitative approach prioritizes depth of analysis over statistical generalizability; quantitative follow-up studies examining the relationship between specific design features and audience response metrics would significantly extend the findings. Future research directions include: longitudinal analysis of the evolution of cancel culture visual grammar over time; cross-cultural comparative analysis of design conventions across different national and linguistic contexts; experimental studies examining the effects of specific design variables on audience moral judgment; and design intervention studies exploring whether counter-cancellation visual artifacts can disrupt the rhetorical mechanisms identified in this study.

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