

Stories of Cancellation: A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Student Political Leaders Amid Online Backlash and Public Accountability

Alprince King Biri¹, Abnir T. Arilin², Damhar K. Pahalawan³, Nurfida A. Alimuddin⁴, Fatima J. Jul⁵, Gary J. Kawasan⁶, Haidit A. Astarani⁷, Sulaiman A. Pagaruan⁸, Nurullaji T. Dunding⁹, Shiernalyn S. Abraham¹⁰

¹ Stratworks Research Inc., Zamboanga City 7000, Philippines.

Email: alprincekingabdulabiri@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0001-7569-6872

² Universidad de Zamboanga, School of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Zamboanga City 7000, Philippines.

Email: abnirarilin5@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0001-4027-8897

³ Political Officer, House of Representatives, Philippines.

Email: damhar.pahalawan@gmail.com

⁴ Mindanao State University–Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography, Tawi-Tawi 7500, Philippines.

Email: nurfidaalimuddin.msutawi-tawi.edu.ph

ORCID: 0009-0009-5413-688X

⁵ Mindanao State University–Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography, Tawi-Tawi 7500, Philippines.

Email: fatimajulopao@gmail.com

⁶ Mindanao State University–Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography, Tawi-Tawi 7500, Philippines.

Email: garykawasan@msutawi-tawi.edu.ph

ORCID: 0009-0003-9525-0167

⁷ Mindanao State University–Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography, Tawi-Tawi 7500, Philippines.

Email: astaranihaidit@gmail.com

⁸ Mindanao State University–Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography, Tawi-Tawi 7500, Philippines.

Email: sulaimanpagaruan@msutawi-tawi.edu.ph

⁹ Mindanao State University–Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography, Tawi-Tawi 7500, Philippines.

Email: habibnurullaji@gmail.com

¹⁰ Mindanao State University–Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography, Tawi-Tawi 7500, Philippines.

Email: shiernalynabraham@msutawi-tawi.edu.ph

Corresponding Author:

Alprince King Biri

Email: alprincekingabdulabiri@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0001-7569-6872

Abstract

The rise of social media has transformed student leadership by increasing opportunities for engagement while simultaneously exposing student leaders to heightened public scrutiny and criticism. This study explored the experiences of student political leaders who faced online backlash and public criticism and examined the strategies they employed in responding to these challenges. Guided by a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, the study involved sixteen student political leaders from higher education institutions across the Zamboanga Peninsula, Philippines, who had experienced significant online criticism during their leadership tenure. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using narrative analysis. The findings revealed that participants

experienced emotional shock and panic, constant online surveillance, withdrawal of political support, personal and professional consequences, distrust among peers, and academic disruption. In response to these experiences, participants employed various coping and communication strategies, including digital disconnection, issuing formal public statements, seeking institutional support, seeking peer validation, choosing strategic silence, and accepting criticism while implementing corrective actions. The study highlights that online backlash extends beyond digital spaces and significantly influences leaders' well-being, relationships, academic performance, and leadership practices. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that student leaders actively navigate public criticism through adaptive communication and accountability strategies. The study contributes to the growing scholarship on digital communication, leadership, and public accountability by providing deeper insights into the lived realities of student leaders operating within highly visible and increasingly interconnected digital environments....

Keywords social media backlash, student political leaders, public criticism, cancel culture, digital communication.

Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the ways in which young people participate in political and civic life. Social media platforms have evolved beyond spaces for interpersonal interaction and have become important arenas for activism, political expression, and collective action. Contemporary youth increasingly engage with social issues through digital networks, utilizing online platforms to raise awareness, mobilize support, challenge inequalities, and influence public discourse (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017; Earl et al., 2017; Marchi & Clark, 2018; Agojo et al., 2023; Pandit et al., 2025). The accessibility and immediacy of social media have enabled young people to participate in political conversations regardless of geographic limitations, fostering new forms of civic engagement and digital citizenship (Sainz & Hanna, 2023; Velasco et al., 2024; Cortés-Ramos et al., 2021). As a result, youth participation in public affairs has become increasingly visible, interconnected, and influential in shaping contemporary political and social movements (Velasquez & LaRose, 2015; Mohamad et al., 2018; Elliott & Earl, 2018; Bansal et al., 2024).

The growing integration of social media into political life has created unprecedented opportunities for participation, representation, and democratic engagement. Digital platforms enable users to share political information, build communities, and participate in discussions that were previously limited to traditional institutions and mainstream media (Kruse et al., 2017; Hong & Kim, 2021). At the same time, these platforms function as contemporary public spheres where public opinion is continuously produced, contested, and amplified (Hasibuan et al., 2024; Herawati et al., 2024). Through algorithms, networked communication, and rapid information dissemination, social media has become a powerful force in shaping political perceptions and influencing public judgments (Arugay & Baquisal, 2022). These developments have strengthened transparency and citizen participation while simultaneously increasing the visibility of political actors and exposing them to heightened public evaluation and scrutiny (Chainey & Tompson, 2012; Feeney & Porumbescu, 2020).

Within higher education institutions, student political leaders occupy a unique position within these digital environments. As representatives of student interests and voices, they increasingly communicate with constituents through online platforms where their decisions, statements, and actions are subject to immediate public reaction. The visibility afforded by social media creates opportunities for leadership engagement, transparency, and accountability; however, it also exposes student leaders to criticism, surveillance, and reputational risks (Uldam, 2017). Research has shown that individuals who maintain public visibility in digital spaces frequently encounter online hostility, harassment, and emotionally demanding interactions that require continuous management of public image and personal well-being (Veletsianos et al., 2018; Dodds et al., 2024). Similarly, activists and politically engaged individuals often experience pressures associated with public criticism and attempts at silencing, particularly when navigating contentious issues in highly polarized environments (Carter Olson & Lapoe, 2018; Hove & Dube, 2021). Even seemingly ordinary acts of political expression on social media can place individuals under intense observation and judgment from online audiences (Caldeira, 2021).

The increasing visibility of political actors in digital spaces has coincided with the emergence of cancel culture as a prominent feature of online discourse. Although definitions vary, cancel culture generally refers to collective expressions of disapproval directed toward individuals perceived to have violated social, ethical, or political expectations (Velasco, 2020; Hooks, 2020). Within online communities, cancellation often manifests through public criticism, calls for accountability, reputational damage, and social exclusion. Existing studies suggest that many individuals view cancel culture as a mechanism for holding people accountable for harmful actions and statements (Exala et al., 2023; Traversa et al., 2023). However, scholars have also expressed concerns regarding its potential to suppress dialogue, discourage dissenting viewpoints, and create environments where fear of public condemnation limits open communication (Kurniawan et al., 2022; Lacasandile et al., 2026). As a result, cancel culture remains a highly contested phenomenon situated at the intersection of accountability, freedom of expression, and public judgment.

The complexity of cancel culture becomes even more apparent when viewed within broader contexts of political polarization, ideological conflict, and digital activism. Social media increasingly serves as a site where competing narratives, social movements, and political identities interact and clash (Robertson, 2021; Cammaerts, 2022). Online activism has empowered individuals and groups to challenge dominant narratives and advocate for social change, yet it has also intensified public debates surrounding acceptable behavior, responsibility, and accountability (Sainz & Hanna, 2023; Tanksley, 2024). The public nature of these interactions means that leaders and activists frequently become symbols within larger ideological struggles, making them vulnerable to criticism that extends beyond specific actions or decisions. Consequently, online backlash often reflects not only reactions to individual behavior but also broader tensions concerning power, representation, and competing visions of social justice (Arugay & Baquisal, 2022; Cammaerts, 2022).

The consequences of online backlash extend beyond public discourse and can significantly affect individuals' psychological well-being, professional identities, and social relationships. Research has demonstrated that online harassment and cyber-ostracism may contribute to emotional distress, anxiety, self-blame, and diminished well-being among those subjected to public hostility (Veletsianos et al., 2018; Yusainy et al., 2023). At the same time, public criticism can prompt reflection, adaptation, and personal growth, particularly when individuals engage meaningfully with issues of accountability and responsibility (Traversa et al., 2023). For leaders, navigating these experiences often requires balancing transparency, responsiveness, and self-preservation while maintaining legitimacy and trust within their communities (Dodds et al., 2024). These realities highlight the importance of understanding not only the structural dynamics of cancellation but also the lived experiences of those who become its subjects.

Despite the growing body of literature on youth activism, social media participation, public accountability, online harassment, and cancel culture, important gaps remain. Existing studies have primarily examined activists, social media users, online communities, journalists, scholars, and broader political movements (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017; Marchi & Clark, 2018; Earl et al., 2017; Veletsianos et al., 2018; Dodds et al., 2024). Other studies have focused on conceptual debates surrounding cancellation, freedom of speech, ideological conflict, and digital participation (Velasco, 2020; Kurniawan et al., 2022; Hooks, 2020; Lacasandile et al., 2026). While these investigations provide valuable insights into the nature of online backlash and accountability, limited attention has been given to student political leaders who occupy formal leadership positions within higher education institutions. More specifically, little is known about how these leaders narrate experiences of online backlash, how they interpret public criticism, how they negotiate accountability, and how such experiences influence their understanding of leadership and public service. The voices of those who simultaneously occupy positions of authority and vulnerability within digital spaces remain largely underexplored.

In response to this gap, the present study explored the experiences of student political leaders who faced online backlash and public criticism while serving within higher education institutions. Through a narrative inquiry approach, the study sought to understand how these leaders interpreted and navigated experiences of cancellation and public accountability, as well as how they constructed meaning from criticism and public scrutiny within their leadership roles. The study contributes to the growing scholarship on digital communication, leadership, political participation, and public accountability through the narratives and lived experiences of student political leaders. Furthermore, it offers deeper insights into how young leaders negotiate the complex relationship between criticism and accountability in an era where leadership increasingly unfolds within highly visible and rapidly evolving digital environments.

The present study was anchored on Social Media Visibility Theory, Audience Empowerment Theory, and the Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF), which collectively explain how online backlash emerges and is experienced within digital environments. Social Media Visibility Theory posits that digital platforms increase the visibility of individuals and public actors, creating opportunities for engagement while simultaneously exposing them to heightened observation, scrutiny, and reputational risks (Uldam, 2017). Complementing this perspective, Audience Empowerment Theory argues that social media redistributes communicative power to users, enabling audiences to actively evaluate, challenge, and hold public figures accountable through collective participation in online discourse (Leonardi et al., 2026). As criticism and public reactions circulate through networked platforms, the Social Amplification of Risk Framework further explains how issues can become magnified through communication processes, intensifying public attention, emotional responses, and demands for accountability beyond the original event or controversy (Kasperson et al., 1988; Zhang et al., 2025). Taken together, these theories provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how student political leaders become highly visible in digital spaces, how online communities participate in evaluating their actions, and how criticism may escalate into broader experiences of backlash, cancellation, and public accountability. These perspectives also support the study's focus on how student political leaders interpret, navigate, and construct meaning from experiences of public scrutiny within increasingly interconnected digital environments.

Methods



Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using a narrative inquiry approach. Narrative inquiry is appropriate for studies that seek to understand and interpret individuals' lived experiences through the stories they tell, allowing researchers to examine how participants make sense of significant events and construct meaning from their experiences over time. The approach recognizes that human experiences are best understood through narratives that reveal personal, social, and contextual dimensions of a phenomenon. In the context of this study, narrative inquiry provided a suitable framework for exploring how student political leaders experienced online backlash, negotiated public accountability, and interpreted the impact of public criticism on their leadership roles. Through participants' narratives, the study sought to capture the complexities, emotions, reflections, and lessons associated with experiences of cancellation and public scrutiny (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Population and Sampling

The participants of the study consisted of sixteen (16) student political leaders from higher education institutions across the Zamboanga Peninsula, Philippines. The study employed purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research to identify information-rich participants who possess direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). To be included in the study, participants had to meet the following criteria: (1) currently serving or have previously served as elected or appointed student political leaders in a recognized student government or student council within a higher education institution; (2) have experienced significant online criticism, public backlash, or cancellation-related incidents through social media platforms during or after their term of service; (3) be willing to share and reflect on their experiences through an in-depth interview; and (4) be at least eighteen (18) years old at the time of participation. The selection of participants from various institutions across the region aimed to provide diverse perspectives and experiences while ensuring that all participants possessed firsthand knowledge of the phenomenon being explored.

Research Instrumentation

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researchers based on the objectives of the study and the existing literature on online backlash, cancel culture, public accountability, and leadership communication. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to narrate their experiences freely while enabling the researcher to explore key topics relevant to the study through follow-up and probing questions. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions focusing on participants' experiences of online criticism, their responses to public backlash, their perceptions of accountability, and the meanings they derived from these experiences. To establish content validity, the interview guide was reviewed by experts in qualitative research and communication studies who evaluated the relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of the questions. Revisions were made based on their recommendations. Trustworthiness and reliability were enhanced through consistent interview procedures, member checking, and maintaining an audit trail of data collection and analysis processes (Kallio et al., 2016).

Table 1:

Semi-structured Interview Questions

Research Objectives	Interview Questions
1. To explore the experiences of student political leaders who faced online backlash and public criticism.	Major Question: What are your experiences when you were cancelled online or faced public backlash while serving as a student political leader? Probing Questions: • What circumstances led to the incident? • How did you feel when the criticism began to emerge? • What challenges did you encounter during this experience? • How did the experience affect your role as a student leader? • How did you understand accountability during this situation?
2. To examine the strategies employed by student political leaders in responding to online backlash and public criticism.	Major Question: How did you respond to online backlash and public criticism as a student political leader? Probing Questions: • What actions did you take after becoming aware of the criticism?

Research Objectives	Interview Questions
	• How did you communicate with the public or your constituents regarding the issue? • Did you seek support from any individuals or institutions? Why? • Were there strategies you used to manage the emotional impact of the situation? • How did you decide whether to respond publicly or remain silent?

Data Collection Procedure

Upon securing approval from the appropriate institutional authorities, the researchers identified and recruited qualified participants who met the established inclusion criteria. Potential participants were contacted through formal invitations explaining the purpose of the study, voluntary nature of participation, and ethical safeguards. Upon obtaining informed consent, individual interviews were scheduled at mutually convenient times and conducted either face-to-face or through secure online communication platforms. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and supplemented with field notes to capture contextual observations and non-verbal cues when applicable. Following each interview, recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and completeness of the narratives. Participants were given opportunities to review their transcripts for clarification and confirmation of the information provided. All collected data were securely stored and organized for subsequent analysis.

Data Analysis

The study utilized narrative analysis to examine and interpret participants' stories. Narrative analysis focuses on understanding how individuals organize experiences into meaningful narratives and how they construct interpretations of significant life events. The analysis began with repeated readings of the interview transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data. Significant events, recurring experiences, and meaningful reflections were identified and coded. Similar codes were then grouped into broader narrative categories and themes that reflected participants' experiences of online backlash, public accountability, and leadership. Attention was also given to the sequence, context, and meanings embedded within each participant's story to preserve the integrity of individual narratives while identifying common patterns across cases. Through this process, the study generated thematic narratives that captured the shared and unique experiences of student political leaders (Riessman, 2008).

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical principles for research involving human participants, including respect for persons, beneficence, and justice as articulated in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. To protect confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned and identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports. Given the potentially sensitive nature of discussing experiences of criticism and public backlash, participants were treated with sensitivity and respect throughout the research process. Furthermore, the study complied with the provisions of the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173), ensuring that personal information was collected, processed, stored, and disposed of securely and solely for research purposes. All digital files and records were password-protected and accessible only to the researchers.

Results

Objective 1: To explore the experiences of student political leaders who faced online backlash and public criticism.

Theme 1: Emotional Shock and Panic

14 out of 16 participants experienced an immediate sense of panic upon discovering that online criticism against them had begun gaining public attention. Participants described feelings of shock, fear, and emotional overwhelm as they encountered numerous notifications, negative comments, and public discussions about them within a short period. For many, the sudden realization that they had become the focus of widespread online attention marked the beginning of a distressing and disorienting experience.

"I woke up at 6:00 AM, opened my phone, and saw seventy notifications tagging me on Facebook. My heart dropped instantly, and my hands started shaking. It felt like the air left the room. In a matter of minutes, I went from a normal sleeping student to the most hated person on campus, and that initial shock was absolutely terrifying."

The findings suggest that the onset of online backlash often generates intense emotional reactions as student leaders confront the sudden reality of public scrutiny and criticism.

Theme 2: Constant Online Surveillance

13 out of 16 participants experienced heightened self-monitoring and anxiety following incidents of online backlash. Participants described becoming excessively cautious in their communication, often revising statements multiple times, avoiding social media engagement, and carefully scrutinizing their words to prevent further criticism. Many expressed feeling constantly observed, as though every action, post, or public statement could potentially trigger another wave of backlash.

"After the allegations of a lost fund went viral, I stopped posting completely. Even now, two terms later, I rewrite simple announcement emails five times before hitting send. You never know a simple mistake in comma could make them say something "a leader who doesn't know basic grammar" or twist a simple inconvenient post into something personal like "you're a leader so you gotta do better". It's so hard not to think about it."

The result implies that experiences of online backlash can foster a culture of hyper-vigilance in student leadership, where self-protection and risk avoidance often take precedence over confident and proactive leadership engagement.

Theme 3: The Withdrawal of Political Support

12 out of 16 participants experienced a noticeable withdrawal of support from friends, political allies, and fellow student leaders following incidents of online backlash. Participants shared that individuals who had previously expressed solidarity and collaboration suddenly became distant, avoided communication, or chose not to publicly associate with them. For many, the experience was more painful than the criticism itself because it involved the loss of trusted relationships and support systems during a period of vulnerability.

"The hardest part wasn't the anonymous hate accounts; it was the silence from my own party. People who co-authored platforms with me on Friday were suddenly leaving my WhatsApp messages on read by Sunday. They didn't want to get dragged into the mud with me, so they just acted like I didn't exist to protect their own political survival."

The outcome suggest that online backlash can extend beyond public criticism and create profound social isolation, leaving student leaders to navigate challenging situations with diminished emotional and political support.

Theme 4: Personal and Professional Consequence

10 out of 16 participants experienced consequences of online backlash that extended beyond their leadership roles and affected their personal, academic, and professional lives. Participants shared that public criticism often disrupted their concentration, emotional well-being, academic performance, and future opportunities. Several expressed concern that digital controversies originating within the university had the potential to follow them beyond campus and influence how others perceived them in professional settings.

"I failed two midterms that week because I couldn't stop staring at my phone. It got scary when people started tagging my summer internship employer in the quote tweets, saying they shouldn't hire a 'bigot.' Campus politics is supposed to be a learning ground, but suddenly my actual future livelihood was on the line over am misconstrued student council vote."

The response highlighted that online backlash can blur the boundaries between student leadership and personal life, creating consequences that extend far beyond the immediate campus community.

Theme 5: Distrust Among Peers

10 out of 16 participants developed feelings of distrust toward friends, fellow council members, and close associates following experiences of online backlash. Participants shared that the circulation of screenshots, leaked conversations, and internal information made them question the intentions of people within their immediate circles. For many, the uncertainty surrounding the source of leaked content created a sense of suspicion that affected their relationships and ability to collaborate with others.

"You start looking at your own committee members differently. I caught myself wondering, 'Who took that screenshot? Who leaked that private group chat?' It ruins your ability to trust anyone. You become deeply paranoid that the people sitting next to you at the meeting are just waiting for you to stumble so they can expose you."

The data show that online backlash can erode interpersonal trust, making student leaders more cautious and guarded in their interactions with peers and colleagues.

Theme 6: Academic Disruption

9 out of 16 participants experienced difficulties maintaining their academic responsibilities during periods of online backlash. Participants reported struggling to focus on coursework, prepare for examinations, complete requirements, and manage deadlines due to the emotional and mental strain caused by public criticism. Many shared that the stress associated with online cancellation consumed significant time and attention, ultimately affecting their academic performance.

"I completely missed a major essay deadline because I spent three straight days staring at comment sections and trying to fix the mess. I couldn't read a textbook; my brain was completely fried from the stress. Campus politics is supposed to be an extracurricular activity, but it ended up tanking my actual GPA that semester."

The findings indicate that experiences of online backlash can interfere with students' academic functioning, making it difficult to balance leadership responsibilities, emotional well-being, and educational commitments.

Objective 2: To examine the strategies employed by student political leaders in responding to online backlash and public criticism.

Theme 7: Digital Disconnection

9 out of 16 participants intentionally limited their exposure to social media during periods of online backlash. Participants described deleting applications, muting notifications, logging out of accounts, or temporarily avoiding online platforms to protect their mental and emotional well-being. For many, creating distance from social media became a coping mechanism that allowed them to regain a sense of control amid overwhelming public criticism.

"The very first thing I did was delete the Twitter and Instagram apps from my phone. I knew that reading thousands of insults wouldn't help me fix the issue, so I forced myself to go completely offline. For almost a week, I didn't open any social media accounts because every notification felt like another attack waiting for me."

The findings suggest that digital disconnection served as a protective strategy that helped student leaders manage the emotional burden of online backlash and reduce exposure to continuous criticism.

Theme 8: Issuing a Formal Public Statement

11 out of 16 participants responded to online backlash by releasing formal statements to clarify issues, address allegations, and communicate their side of the situation. Participants viewed official statements as a way to provide accurate information, correct misunderstandings, and demonstrate accountability without engaging in emotionally charged online arguments. For many, presenting facts through an organized and professional response was perceived as a more effective strategy for managing public criticism.

"Instead of arguing back in the comments, I gathered the executive board and wrote a formal PDF statement. We laid out exactly what happened with the student budget, took ownership of the administrative error, and posted it as an official press release. I chose to respond with institutional facts rather than emotional defense."

— Participant 10

The analysis says that formal public statements served as a strategic communication tool that allowed student leaders to address criticism while maintaining professionalism and accountability.

Theme 9: Seeking Institutional Support

8 out of 16 participants sought assistance from university officials, student affairs offices, campus security personnel, or other institutional authorities when online backlash escalated beyond manageable levels. Participants shared that they turned to these support systems when criticism evolved into harassment, threats, or situations that affected their safety and well-being. For many, seeking institutional support provided reassurance and guidance during a period of uncertainty.

"When the comments turned into actual threats of violence against me, I stopped treating it like campus drama. I went straight to the Dean of Students and the campus security office. I needed professional adults to intervene because the situation had gone way past student politics and became a safety issue for me."

The narrative suggest that institutional support played an important role in helping student leaders navigate severe forms of online backlash, particularly when concerns extended beyond criticism and became matters of personal safety.

Theme 10: Seeking Peer Validation

9 out of 16 participants sought advice, feedback, or reassurance from trusted peers before responding to online backlash. Participants shared that the emotional intensity of the situation often made it difficult to think objectively, prompting them to consult fellow student leaders, close friends, or council members before issuing public statements. Seeking peer validation helped them assess the potential impact of their responses and avoid actions that might further escalate the controversy.

"I didn't trust my own judgment anymore because I was too emotional. Before I posted any apology or clarification, I sent the draft to a group chat with four other council members. I made them read it over and tell me if it sounded okay, because I needed an outside perspective to make sure I wasn't making things worse."

The interview response suggests that peer validation served as an important support mechanism that helped student leaders make more deliberate and carefully considered responses during periods of public criticism.

Theme 11: Choosing Strategic Silence

7 out of 16 participants deliberately avoided responding publicly to online criticism and backlash. Participants believed that engaging with negative comments could prolong the controversy, attract additional attention, or intensify public reactions. Instead, they chose to remain silent, continue fulfilling their responsibilities, and wait for public interest in the issue to gradually diminish.

"My strategy was just to stay quiet and let the storm pass. On the internet, people lose interest in things really fast if you don't keep responding to them. I didn't comment on the posts, I didn't make a statement, and I didn't argue with anyone online. I just focused on my responsibilities and waited for people to move on to the next issue."

The findings suggest that strategic silence was viewed as a deliberate coping and communication strategy aimed at preventing further escalation of online backlash.

Theme 12: Accepting Criticism and Making Corrections

10 out of 16 participants responded to online backlash by acknowledging public concerns, issuing apologies, and implementing changes to address the issue. Participants shared that accepting criticism was often necessary to rebuild trust, reduce tensions, and maintain their credibility as student leaders. While some initially disagreed with portions of the criticism, many recognized that responding constructively was essential to restoring confidence in their leadership.

"Honestly, at that point, I didn't really have a choice. The issue had already spread everywhere, and people were demanding a response. Whether I agreed with every criticism or not, I knew staying silent would only make things worse. I released a public apology, met with the affected student organizations, and revised the policy because I needed to show that we were listening. As a leader, you have to protect the credibility of the office, not just your own feelings."

The result demonstrated that accepting criticism and implementing corrective actions were often viewed as necessary leadership responses for preserving trust, accountability, and institutional legitimacy.

Discussion

Online backlash is experienced by student political leaders as a multidimensional disruption that extends far beyond the immediate act of public criticism. Across the six themes, participants described experiences characterized by emotional distress, heightened self-surveillance, social isolation, interpersonal distrust, academic disruption, and concerns regarding future opportunities. The progression of these experiences indicates that online backlash is not perceived as a singular event but rather as a cascading process that affects multiple domains of student leaders' lives simultaneously. These findings support previous studies emphasizing that visibility within digital spaces exposes individuals to increased scrutiny, criticism, and reputational vulnerability (Uldam, 2017; Veletsianos et al., 2018; Dodds et al., 2024). Similarly, the emotional shock reported by participants reflects the realities of highly visible digital environments where criticism can rapidly escalate through social media networks, amplifying public attention and emotional responses (Hasibuan et al., 2024; Arugay & Baquisal, 2022). The findings further reinforce the argument of Velasco (2020) and Exala et al. (2023) that cancellation is often experienced as a form of collective judgment that extends beyond accountability and enters the realm of social exclusion and reputational threat. From a theoretical perspective, these experiences may be explained through Social Media Visibility Theory, which posits that increased online visibility simultaneously creates opportunities for engagement and heightened exposure to evaluation, criticism, and surveillance (Uldam, 2017). Student political leaders occupy highly visible positions within their institutions, making them particularly vulnerable to the intensified scrutiny enabled by digital platforms.

Moreover, the findings reveal that the consequences of online backlash are not confined to digital spaces but spill over into participants' academic, social, and professional lives. Experiences of losing political allies, distrusting peers, and struggling academically suggest that online criticism can reshape both interpersonal relationships and everyday functioning. These results resonate with the work of Yusainy et al. (2023), who found that experiences of cyber-ostracism negatively affect individuals' emotional well-being, and with Hove and Dube (2021), who observed that public online engagement often exposes young leaders to personal and social risks beyond the virtual environment. The findings may also be understood through the Social Amplification of Risk Framework, which explains how communication processes can magnify the perceived severity and consequences of an issue through repeated exposure, public discussion, and collective participation (Kasperson et al., 1988; Zhang et al., 2025). In the present study, what may have originated as isolated incidents of criticism evolved into broader experiences affecting participants' identities, relationships, and academic performance. This suggests that student leadership in the digital age involves navigating risks that extend beyond traditional leadership responsibilities. Consequently, higher education institutions may need to recognize online backlash as not merely a communication issue but also a student welfare concern that requires emotional, academic, and institutional support mechanisms for leaders operating within increasingly visible and participatory digital environments.

Student political leaders employed a combination of protective, communicative, and collaborative strategies in responding to online backlash and public criticism. Rather than relying on a single approach, participants demonstrated a tendency to adapt their responses according to the severity of the situation, the nature of the criticism, and the potential consequences involved. The themes of digital disconnection, strategic silence, and seeking peer validation suggest that many participants initially focused on managing the emotional impact of backlash before engaging in public communication. These findings align with previous studies emphasizing that

individuals subjected to online hostility often adopt self-protective strategies to reduce psychological strain and regain emotional control (Veletsianos et al., 2018; Dodds et al., 2024). Similarly, Carter Olson and Lapoe (2018) observed that individuals facing hostile online environments frequently develop coping mechanisms that allow them to continue functioning despite public criticism and digital harassment. The findings further indicate that responses to backlash are not solely reactive but are often carefully calculated and strategic. From a theoretical perspective, Audience Empowerment Theory helps explain these behaviors by suggesting that digital audiences possess significant influence over public discourse and reputation, compelling leaders to carefully evaluate how and when they communicate in response to criticism. As audiences gain greater power to shape narratives and public perceptions, student leaders become increasingly conscious of the potential consequences associated with every response, silence, apology, or clarification.

The findings also demonstrate that participants viewed accountability as an important consideration in managing public criticism. The use of formal public statements, consultations with institutional authorities, and efforts to correct perceived mistakes indicate that many student leaders sought to balance self-protection with the need to maintain credibility and public trust. These findings support the work of Exala et al. (2023) and Traversa et al. (2023), who argued that public criticism and cancellation are often interpreted as mechanisms through which communities express demands for accountability and corrective action. Likewise, Kurniawan et al. (2022) noted that responses to public criticism frequently involve navigating tensions between personal defense and social responsibility. The findings may further be interpreted through the Social Amplification of Risk Framework, which suggests that public controversies can intensify through repeated communication, collective participation, and heightened visibility, thereby increasing pressure on individuals to manage reputational threats effectively (Kasperson et al., 1988; Zhang et al., 2025). The willingness of some participants to apologize, revise policies, or seek institutional intervention suggests that online backlash may function not only as a source of distress but also as a catalyst for organizational reflection and corrective action. Consequently, the findings imply that effective leadership in digital environments increasingly requires competencies in crisis communication, reputation management, emotional regulation, and stakeholder engagement. Higher education institutions may therefore benefit from equipping student leaders with training and support systems that prepare them to respond constructively to public criticism while safeguarding their well-being and leadership effectiveness.

Conclusion

The study revealed that online backlash is not merely a moment of public criticism but a complex experience that affects the emotional, social, academic, and professional lives of student political leaders. Participants described feelings of panic, constant surveillance, social isolation, distrust, and academic disruption, demonstrating that the consequences of digital criticism extend far beyond the online environment. These findings suggest that student leadership in the digital age involves navigating a level of public visibility and scrutiny that previous generations of student leaders may not have experienced to the same extent.

The study further showed that student political leaders are not passive recipients of criticism but active agents who employ various strategies to manage public backlash. Participants responded through digital disconnection, formal statements, institutional support, peer consultation, strategic silence, and corrective actions. These responses reflect the increasingly communicative nature of leadership, where leaders must balance accountability, reputation management, emotional well-being, and organizational responsibilities while operating within highly participatory digital spaces. The findings underscore the importance of adaptive communication practices in responding to rapidly evolving online controversies.

More importantly, this study addressed a significant gap in the literature by centering the narratives of student political leaders who have personally experienced online backlash and public criticism. While previous studies have explored youth activism, cancel culture, digital participation, and online harassment, limited attention has been given to how student leaders themselves experience and respond to these challenges. The study therefore contributes a deeper understanding of the human realities behind public scrutiny, highlighting that online backlash is not solely a matter of accountability or reputation but also a lived experience that shapes leadership, relationships, and well-being in contemporary higher education contexts.

Limitations

This study is limited by its focus on sixteen student political leaders from higher education institutions within the Zamboanga Peninsula, which may not fully represent the experiences of student leaders in other regions, educational contexts, or cultural settings. Additionally, the findings relied on participants' personal narratives and retrospective accounts, which may be influenced by individual interpretations, memory recall, and subjective perceptions of online backlash. As a qualitative narrative inquiry, the study sought depth and richness of understanding rather than statistical generalization; therefore, the findings should be interpreted within the specific contexts and experiences of the participants involved.

References

1. Agojo, Kevin Nielsen & Bravo, M.F.J. & Reyes, J.A.C. & Rodriguez, J.A.E. & Santillan, A.M.A.. (2023). Activism beyond the streets: Examining social media usage and youth activism in the Philippines. *Asian Journal of Social Science*. 51. 10.1016/j.ajss.2023.04.006.
2. Arugay, A. A., & Baquisal, J. K. A. (2022). Mobilized and Polarized: Social Media and Disinformation Narratives in the 2022 Philippine Elections. *Pacific Affairs*, 95(3), 549–573. <https://doi.org/10.5509/2022953549>
3. Bansal, N., Selvi S, P., & P, S. (2024). DEMOCRATIZING INDIA: THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND YOUTH EMPOWERMENT. *Public Administration and Law Review*, 2(18), 42–50. <https://doi.org/10.36690/2674-5216-2024-2-42-50>
4. Caldeira, S. P. (2021). “It’s Not Just Instagram Models”: Exploring the Gendered Political Potential of Young Women’s Instagram Use. *Media and Communication*, 9(2), 5-15. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i2.3731>
5. Cammaerts, Bart. (2022). The abnormalisation of social justice: The ‘anti-woke culture war’ discourse in the UK. *Discourse & Society*. 33. 10.1177/09579265221095407.
6. Carter Olson, C., & Lapoe, V. (2018). Combating the Digital Spiral of Silence: Academic Activists Versus Social Media Trolls (pp. 271–291). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-72917-6_14
7. Chainey, S., & Thompson, L. (2012). Engagement, Empowerment and Transparency: Publishing Crime Statistics using Online Crime Mapping1. *Policing*, 6(3), 228–239. <https://doi.org/10.1093/police/pas006>
8. Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass.
9. Cortés-Ramos, A., Torrecilla García, J. A., Landa-Blanco, M., Poleo Gutiérrez, F. J., & Castilla Mesa, M. T. (2021). Activism and Social Media: Youth Participation and Communication. *Sustainability*, 13(18), 10485. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su131810485>
10. Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
11. Dodds, T., Geboers, M., & Boukes, M. (2024). “It Became No Man’s Land”: The Burden of Moderating Online Harassment in Newswork. *Journalism Practice*, 20(3), 953–970. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2024.2387664>
12. Earl, J., Maher, T. V., & Elliott, T. (2017). Youth, activism, and social movements. *Sociology Compass*, 11(4), e12465. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12465>
13. Elliott, T., & Earl, J. (2018). Organizing the Next Generation: Youth Engagement with Activism Inside and Outside of Organizations. *Social Media + Society*, 4(1), 205630511775072. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117750722>
14. Exala, Den & Valdecañas, Marianne & Encarnacion, Faustina & Garcia, James & Vallespin, Mc Rollyn. (2023). Social Media Landscape and Cancel Culture: Insights from College Students. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. 6. 241-252. 10.2139/ssrn.4715439.
15. Feeney, M. K., & Porumbescu, G. (2020). The Limits of Social Media for Public Administration Research and Practice. *Public Administration Review*, 81(4), 787–792. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13276>
16. Hasibuan, E. J., Putra, A. D. R., & Dirgantari, A. S. (2024). The Role of Social Media Algorithms in Shaping Public Opinion During Political Campaigns. *International Journal of Social and Human*, 1(2), 165–172. <https://doi.org/10.59613/z2sbvw50>
17. Herawati, A., Widowati, N., & Shahirah, N. (2024). The Role of E-Governance in Shaping Political Ideologies within Online Media in Indonesia: A Comprehensive Review. *EVOLUTIONARY STUDIES IN IMAGINATIVE CULTURE*, 258–269. <https://doi.org/10.70082/esiculture.vi.685>
18. Hodgkinson, D., & Melchiorre, L. (2019). Introduction: student activism in an era of decolonization. *Africa*, 89(S1), S1–S14. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0001972018000888>
19. Hong, H., & Kim, Y. (2021). What makes people engage in civic activism on social media? *Online Information Review*, 45(3), 562–576. <https://doi.org/10.1108/oir-03-2020-0105>
20. Hooks, Austin M., "Cancel culture: posthuman hauntologies in digital rhetoric and the latent values of virtual community networks" (2020). Masters Theses and Doctoral Dissertations. <https://scholar.utc.edu/theses/669>

21. Hotchkins, B. (2017). Black Women Students at Predominantly White Universities: Narratives of Identity Politics, Well-Being and Leadership Mobility. *NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education*, 10(2), 144–155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407882.2017.1326943>
22. Hove, B., & Dube, B. (2021). What Now for the Zimbabwean Student Demonstrator? Online Activism and Its Challenges for University Students in A COVID-19 Lockdown. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 11(2), 100. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v11n2p100>
23. Kallio, H., Pietilä, A. M., Johnson, M., & Kangasniemi, M. (2016). Systematic methodological review: Developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 72(12), 2954–2965. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.13031>
24. Kasperson, R. E., Renn, O., Slovic, P., Brown, H. S., Emel, J., Goble, R., Kasperson, J. X., & Ratick, S. (1988). The social amplification of risk: A conceptual framework. *Risk Analysis*, 8(2), 177–187.
25. Kruse, L. M., Norris, D. R., & Flinchum, J. R. (2017). Social Media as a Public Sphere? Politics on Social Media. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 59(1), 62–84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2017.1383143>
26. Kurniawan, Trio & Ngawan, Rambang & Alno, Yudas & Herianto, Agus. (2022). CANCEL CULTURE AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM: A Perspective from Democratic-Deliberative Education Philosophy. *Waskita: Jurnal Pendidikan Nilai dan Pembangunan Karakter*. 6. 1. 10.21776/ub.waskita.2022.006.01.1.
27. Lacasandile, J., Mauleon, A. D., Sibug, M. C., Panizares, L., De Guzman, P. R., Ladera, A., Villanueva, J. J., Fernan, B., & Tanedo, M. (2026). Investigating the tension of cancel culture and its impact on freedom of speech among communication students in University of Perpetual Help System Manila. *International Journal For Multidisciplinary Research*, 8(3). <https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2026.v08i03.77401>
28. Leonardi, P. M., et al. (2026). Social media and organizations: An integrative review and future research agenda. *Journal of Management*.
29. Marchi, R., & Clark, L. S. (2018). Social media and connective journalism: The formation of counterpublics and youth civic participation. *Journalism*, 22(2), 285–302. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918807811>
30. Mohamad, B., Abdu Dauda, S., & Halim, H. (2018). Youth Offline Political Participation: Trends and Role of Social Media. *Jurnal Komunikasi, Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 34(3), 192–207. <https://doi.org/10.17576/jkmjc-2018-3403-11>
31. National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. (1979). The Belmont Report: Ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects of research. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.
32. Pandit, M., Magadum, T., Mittal, H., & Kushwaha, O. (2025). Digital Natives, Digital Activists: Youth, Social Media and the Rise of Environmental Sustainability Movements. In *ArXiv.org. Societa Italiana Di Fisica*. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arxiv.2505.10158>
33. Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
34. Republic Act No. 10173. (2012). Data Privacy Act of 2012. Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines. <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2012/08/15/republic-act-no-10173/>
35. Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. SAGE Publications.
36. Robertson, Rebecca. (2021). A critical race theory analysis of transnational student activism, social media counter-stories, and the hegemonic logics of diversity work in higher education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*. 36. 1-18. 10.1080/09518398.2021.1885073.
37. Sahu, D., & Gupta, D. (2024). Social Media and Political Activism in India: A Content Analysis of Online Movements. *Economic Sciences*, 20(2), 35–46. <https://doi.org/10.69889/b4gjer19>
38. Sainz, G. M., & Hanna, A. (2023). Youth digital activism, social media and human rights education: the Fridays for Future movement. *Human Rights Education Review*, 6(1), 116–136. <https://doi.org/10.7577/hrer.4958>
39. Stornaiuolo, A., & Thomas, E. E. (2017). Disrupting Educational Inequalities Through Youth Digital Activism. *Review of Research in Education*, 41(1), 337–357. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732x16687973>
40. Tanksley, T. (2024). Race, Education and #BlackLivesMatter: How Online Transformational Resistance Shapes the Offline Experiences of Black College-Age Women. *Urban Education*, 59(7), 2179-2207.
41. Traversa, M., Tian, Y., & Wright, S. C. (2023). Cancel culture can be collectively validating for groups experiencing harm. *Frontiers in psychology*, 14, 1181872. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1181872>

42. Uldam, J. (2017). Social media visibility: challenges to activism. *Media, Culture & Society*, 40(1), 41–58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717704997>
43. Uldam, J. (2017). Social media visibility: Challenges to activism. *Media, Culture & Society*, 40(1), 41–58.
44. Velasco, J. C., C Manguera, J. J., V Navalan, E. J., C Limchiko, J. N., D Bayot, T. A. M., & V Mercado, M. G. (2024). The Digital Dynamics of Political Engagement Among Filipino Youth: Examining Participation in Social Media Platforms. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 32(3), 1051–1071. <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.32.3.12>
45. Velasco, Joseph. (2020). You are Cancelled: Virtual Collective Consciousness and the Emergence of Cancel Culture as Ideological Purging. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*. 12. 10.21659/rupkatha.v12n5.rioc1s21n2.
46. Velasquez, A., & Larose, R. (2015). Social Media for Social Change: Social Media Political Efficacy and Activism in Student Activist Groups. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 59(3), 456–474. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2015.1054998>
47. Veletsianos, G., Houlden, S., Hodson, J., & Gosse, C. (2018). Women scholars' experiences with online harassment and abuse: Self-protection, resistance, acceptance, and self-blame. *New Media & Society*, 20(12), 4689–4708. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818781324>
48. Yusainy, Cleoputri & Putri, Intan & Fadliilah, Lita & Veronica, Gracia & Darmawan, Ircham & Wicaksono, Wahyu. (2023). Cancelled: Effect of Cyber-Ostracism on the Mental Condition of Instagram Users. *Psymphatic : Jurnal Ilmiah Psikologi*. 10. 1-10. 10.15575/psy.v10i1.18158.
49. Zhang, Y., et al. (2025). How authoritative media and personal social media influence policy compliance: Integrating motivation theory and the social amplification of risk framework. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 27, e64940..