Platform-Mediated Cancel Culture and Its Impact on Radio Presenters' Brands in Nairobi

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ABSTRACT

Digital media platforms increasingly enable public shaming movements that bypass traditional organizational crisis management. This study examines how platform-mediated cancel culture on X affects the professional brands and reputations of radio presenters and their parent broadcast institutions in Nairobi County, Kenya. Guided by Moral-Emotional Contagion Theory, Platformed Media Theory, and Situational Crisis Communication Theory, the research employed a qualitative, multi-case design to analyze six prominent cancellation incidents involving Nairobi media personalities between 2020 and 2026. Data collection involved harvesting 8,527 digital tweet artefacts using Application Programming Interface extraction, alongside document analysis of official corporate press releases, news reports, and institutional statements. Qualitative thematic analysis following a phronetic iterative approach revealed that the structural design architecture of X, driven by outrage algorithms, actively accelerates negative audience feedback into viral corporate crises. The findings demonstrate that high-velocity online firestorms induce temporal compression, shortening organizational response windows and driving hasty corporate disciplinary actions. Additionally, cancel culture campaigns inflict severe professional deplatforming and economic repercussions on media personalities while damaging institutional brand equity. The study concludes that social media algorithms displace central corporate gatekeepers by empowering decentralized affective publics to enforce moral accountability, necessitating proactive, value-aligned crisis communication strategies.

Keywords: Cancel culture, Radio presenters, X platform architecture, Brand management, Crisis communication, Affective publics

INTRODUCTION

The term ‘cancel culture’ refers to the mass withdrawal of support from public figures or celebrities who make statements or take actions deemed socially unacceptable by their followers. Mass shaming practices occur frequently on social networks including X, Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook (Đurđević, 2025). Within modern day hybrid media ecosystems, rising consumer activism has introduced unforeseen risks to distabilizing traditional brand management practices. The opaque platform architecture and algorithmic curation structurally amplify negative stakeholders' sentiments by curating digital participation around engagement metrics (van Dijck et al., 2018). The slang term originated in 1990s American culture referring to romantic breakups and romantic rejection. The word ‘cancel’ first appeared in the 1981 track ‘Your Love Is Cancelled’ by the American disco band Chic before gaining traction in pop media and later being adopted on social media. Despite the widespread nature of online mobbing, empirical communication research addressing cancel culture in African contexts remains scarce (Kingston, 2023). Nairobi provides a rich research setting because of its dense concentration of broadcast houses, activists and lobby groups, a robust digital infrastructure and an active online public that position the capital as an agenda-setting center for national and African discourse (Ogola & Rodny-Gumede, 2015). Therefore, analyzing Nairobi cancel culture scenarios addresses an existing and dire intellectual gap in the field corporate communication within Kenya.

The termination of radio presenter Shaffie Weru in March 2021 brought to focus the volatile and fierce nature of online discourse in Kenya. Statista (2026) Places Kenya at the apex of social media consumption in the world above Brazil and the Philippines, with 87.2% of digital consumers using social platforms (Communications Authority of Kenya, 2024) and 78.5% of internet users maintaining active social accounts across various social media platforms (Kemp, 2025). Although X ranks fifth in overall user popularity in Kenya, it serves as the dominant arena for agenda-setting, thereby offering fertile ground for intense public debate and stakeholder coalescence. Opaque algorithms, rapid information diffusion bypass traditional editorial gatekeepers, transforming radio broadcasts into corporate reputational crises within hours. From a corporate communication perspective, a significant knowledge gap exist concerning how platform mechanisms interact with localized normative transgressions to generate professional and economic brand and reputation damage. This thesis examined six high-profile cancellation cases involving Nairobi-based radio presenters between 2020 and 2026 to bridge this empirical gap.

This research integrates Moral-Emotional Contagion Theory, Platformed Media Theory, and Situational Crisis Communication framework to evaluate platform-mediated cancel culture on X. Moral-Emotional Contagion Theory, specifically the Motivation, Attention, Design (MAD) framework, illustrates how moral outrage and high-arousal negative emotions accelerate viral spread online. Platformed Media Theory demonstrates that social platforms are not neutral conduits but engagement-driven ranking systems that selectively prioritize morally charged content to maximize data commodification. Situational Crisis Communication Theory offers an analytical framework for assessing how broadcast stations formulate public relations postures when temporal compression from rapid online escalation severely limits organisational response time.

Combining the MAD model of the Emotion-Contagion Theory with the Triadic Mechanism of Platform Power from the Platformed Media Theory offers an empirical lens to examine how Nairobi, and by extension, Kenyan media personalities' normative violations are processed by the opaque platform algorithms to create an online firestorm. For corporate communication practitioners, the study establishes a practical framework to navigate online firestorms, update organizational social media monitoring tools, and protect brand equity as power migrates from central institutions to networked digital communities of the platform society.

The general objective of this study was to investigate the impact of X-based cancel culture crises on the professional brands of radio presenters and their institutions in Nairobi County. To fulfil this general aim, the study addressed the following specific objectives:

- To analyze the nature of X-based cancel culture campaigns targeting radio presenters and their stations in Nairobi County.
- To examine the role of X's platform architecture in escalating negative posts into viral corporate brand crises for radio presenters and their stations in Nairobi County.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design and Setting

The study employed a qualitative research design centred on qualitative content analysis. This approach provided a non-reactive framework for evaluating digital artefacts such as tweets, replies, quote tweets, hashtags, and mixed-media items which exist as non-living data independent of the researcher. This design enabled an in-depth examination of how networked crowds co-create moral meaning and enforce specific punitive sanctions without introducing researcher-induced bias in primary data.

The research setting comprised both the virtual environment of X (formerly Twitter) and the geographical boundary of Nairobi County, Kenya. Nairobi served as the ideal empirical site because it functions as Kenya's commercial, political, and media epicentre. Nairobi city hosts the highest national concentration of broadcast media houses and social media active audiences positioning its cyber-publics as agenda-setters for national political and socio-economic discourse.

Participants, Sampling, and Data Sources

The target population comprised two main groups. Nairobi-based radio presenters who have been subjected to online cancel culture campaigns, and the digital public on X who initiated, amplified or took part in the cancel parties. The sampling frame consisted of verified radio presenter handles, related hashtags, and public tweet archives linked to specific cancellation incidents. The research utilized a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling hand-picked information-rich cases of high-profile radio personalities in Nairobi who experienced significant online mobbing over perceived normative violations. Snowball sampling helped trace interconnected discussion threads, quote-tweet cascades, and hidden participant networks across X.

Although the study initially targeted 3–5 radio presenters and 5,000 tweets, the final sample expanded to six information-rich case studies representing both male and female personalities to capture a broader picture of the cancel scenarios. The final dataset encompassed 8,527 digital tweet sentiments.

The study evaluated two distinct data streams to capture the full scope of cancellations within Kenya's hybrid media system. Primary documents such as press releases, broadcast station statements, corporate sponsor announcements and news reports were analyzed to establish offline crisis timelines and regulatory interventions. Harvested digital artifacts from X included public tweets, replies, quote tweets, retweet metrics, and mixed-media artifacts (memes, GIFs, emojis, and local slang).

The purposive selection of six high-profile media personalities presented inherent analytical limitations. These presenters possessed massive follower networks and were established as brands, and therefore their normative violations readily reached the engagement thresholds required to trigger X's outrage algorithm and prompt stakeholder action. In contrast, cancellation dynamics for less prominent or mid-tier broadcasters would likely unfold differently and almost never get any attention irrespective of the normative violation. This group may fail to generate the retweet velocity or trending hashtag momentum necessary to loop in high-power stakeholders, meaning their transgressions might result in minimal backlash, which would be handled internally according to policy.

Data Collection Procedures and Technical Instruments

Data extraction relied on a technical pipeline that integrated the official Twitter/X Application Programming Interface (API) with Python scripting. Using the Python tweepy library, automated scripts extracted public tweet data across predefined query lists, user handles, and temporal crisis windows. Additional metadata such as precise retweet, like, and reply counts were recorded using API endpoints and digital harvesting tools like 'Export Comments'. Keywords and hashtag-based archival searches captured high-velocity firestorms using identifiers Hashtags and sponsor call-out handles.

The primary research instrument was a structured Content Analysis Protocol supported by a specialized Concept Book (codebook). The codebook integrated first-level descriptive codes and second-level analytical codes derived from the theoretical framework. The first-level (descriptive) codes captured visible manifestations such as In Vivo Tags (local slang and hashtags), Direct Action (calls for boycotts or unfollowing), De-platforming Calls (direct tags targeting corporate sponsors), and Brand Defense. The second-level (analytic) codes evaluated latent dynamics including Contagion/Frenzy (rapid uncritical viral spread), Looking-Glass Self (brand identity reshaped by crowd perception), Risky Shift (hasty corporate disciplinary decisions under crowd pressure), Platform Moderation (algorithmic amplification), and Economic Repercussions. To test feasibility and logistical parameters, the study conducted a pilot study on the March 2021 Personality 1 cancellation incident, applying a 10% sample (n = 48) across a six-month of the initial crisis window. The pilot phase refined the coding protocol, established boundary timelines, and tested the Python scraping scripts. Instrument reliability was maintained through intercoder agreement testing, audit trails, and a detailed research log tracking weekly analytical decision.

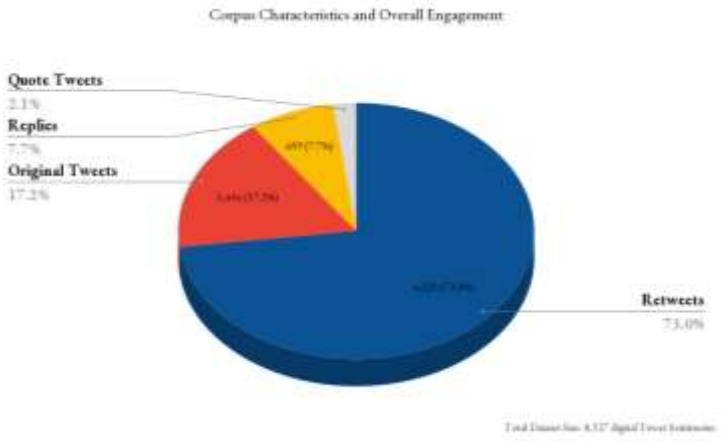
Analytical Methods and Software

Data analysis followed a Data Analysis Spiral utilizing a phronetic iterative approach moving systematically from raw digital data to hierarchical themes. Primary-cycle coding identified initial descriptive tags within the harvested corpus. Secondary-cycle coding organized these labels into hierarchical thematic categories to offer insights into how X's platform mechanisms (datafication, commodification, and selection) transformed localized broadcast statements into viral reputational crises. Quantitative metric distributions (retweet velocities, likes, reply-to-retweet ratios) were computed in Python (pandas) to substantiate the qualitative narrative displays. The study adhered strictly to the ethical standards of the British Educational Research Association (BERA). To protect online users in public digital spaces, non-public figures were anonymized using pseudonyms, and quotation depths were restricted to prevent profile tracing. Ethical clearance was formally granted by the Multimedia University of Kenya Institutional Scientific and Ethics Review Committee (ISERC) and licensed by the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) under research permit authorization. Anonymization introduced a sharp ethical tension between adhering to privacy standards and preserving analytical depth. Converting high-profile media figures into standardised codes inadvertently erased rich contextual nuances associated with these personalities. Consequently, stripping away unique public brand identities obscured how a presenter's prior career trajectory, distinct broadcast voice, and existing audience sentiment directly conditioned both the qualitative severity of the digital mobbing and the specific mechanics of their eventual brand rehabilitation.

FINDINGS

Corpus Characteristics and Overall Engagement

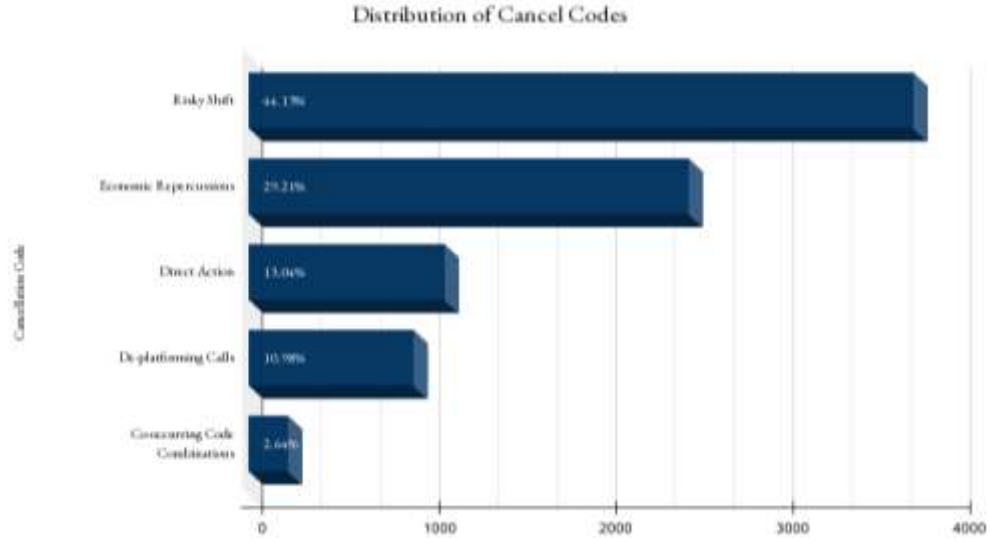
The harvested dataset comprised 8,527 digital tweet sentiments associated with six Nairobi-based radio presenters across six cancellation controversies between 2020 and 2026. An analysis of post types across the corpus revealed that retweets constituted the predominant form of user participation with 6,225 instances; 73.00%, followed by original tweets of 1,464 instances; 17.17%, replies at 659 instances; 7.73%, and quote tweets at 179 instances; 2.10%. Across the complete dataset N = 8,527.



Graph I: Characteristics and Overall Cancel Engagement. Source: Researcher (2026)

Distribution of Cancellation Codes and Personality Profiles

The qualitative content analysis identified four primary single-code categories alongside eleven co-occurring multi-code combinations across the 8,527 digital artefacts. Risky Shift, representing hasty pressure-driven corporate disciplinary actions, emerged as the most frequent code, totaling 3,763 occurrences (44.13%). Economic Repercussions registered 2,491 occurrences (29.21%), followed by Direct Action 1,112 occurrences (13.04%), and De-platforming Calls 936 occurrences (10.98%). Co-occurring code combinations accounted for the remaining 225 instances (2.64%).



Graph 2: Distribution of Cancel Codes Source: Researcher

Role of X Platform Design Architecture in Escalating Negative Feedback

The technical design architecture of X actively accelerates localized audience complaints into severe institutional crises through engagement-predictive ranking mechanisms. X platform operates not as a neutral conduit but through opaque triadic mechanisms of datafication, commodification, and selection that systematically prioritize high-arousal negative content to maximize user attention and monetization (van Dijck et al., 2018). Data analysis indicated that X's non-neutral algorithmic design functions as an active catalyst in converting localized broadcast statements into corporate reputational crises. Algorithmic curation replaces traditional editorial gatekeeping by ranking posts based on raw interaction volume. High-arousal negative sentiment experienced rapid diffusion and in an artificial intelligence paradox, ranking algorithms misinterpret this influx of negative sentiment as high engagement, further elevating the post's visibility (Bentzen, 2020). Consequently, algorithmic prioritization induces severe temporal compression turning an emerging issue into a crisis within minutes. Coordinated call-out hashtags subsequently organize emotionally charged users into affective publics that enforce networked accountability (Bouvier & Machin, 2021). By rewarding emotional intensity over deliberate discourse, subsequently X's underlying architecture collapses corporate response windows and transforms a trigger into high-velocity reputational firestorms.

Table III presents the five platform design mechanisms identified during the qualitative synthesis.

Table I: Architectural Mechanisms of X in Crisis Escalation

Role of X Design Architecture	How It Escalates Negative Feedback in Nairobi	Empirical Evidence from Personality Cases
Trigger	A single tweet of outrage sparks mass visibility when amplified by algorithms.	Personality 1's baseline (6,070 tweets) demonstrates how a single broadcast comment cascades into national criticism.
Ranking Systems Privilege Activity	Ranking algorithms prioritize posts with high resharing, accelerating visibility regardless of sentiment.	Personality 3's target tweets achieved a mean of 1,061.68 retweets despite modest overall post volume.
The Ratio Phenomenon	Elevated reply/quote-tweet ratios signal public condemnation, which algorithms misinterpret as high engagement.	Personality 5's dataset registered 0.74 average replies per post and 82 Risky Shift codes.

Verified Account Amplification	High-profile verified accounts accelerate diffusion and lend public credibility to cancellation campaigns.	Personality 1's extensive follower network magnified institutional backlash and sponsor call-outs.
Affective Publics	Trending hashtags foster temporary digital collectivities bound by shared moral outrage.	Personality 6's case accumulated 14 Direct Action codes through coordinated user participation.

Source: Research Data (2026)

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study experienced primary limitations surrounding data collection in several ways. To begin with, tweets were harvested retroactively and access to historical data was constrained by user content deletion and platform moderation. Key tweets, quote-tweets, and associated metadata were deleted or restricted after the initial firestorm peaked, leaving some ephemeral interactions unrecoverable. Secondly, the harvested dataset captured an active, digitally literate subset of X users within Nairobi County. While this group serves as an influential agenda-setting public, it does not fully represent broader offline or rural Kenyan audiences. Finally, there was interpretive complexity in analyzing unstructured digital artefacts because it required interpreting context-dependent Kenyan slang (Sheng), satire, memes, and emojis, introducing inherent qualitative subjectivity that required intercoder reliability testing and a detailed research log to mitigate.

Theoretical Interpretation of Empirical Findings

The empirical results demonstrate that platform-mediated cancel culture on X operates as an extra-institutional social sanctioning mechanism that fundamentally disrupts traditional corporate communication practices. Integrating Moral-Emotional Contagion Theory, Platformed Media Theory, and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) provides a multiperspective anatomy of how localized broadcast transgressions escalate into viral reputational crises.

Applying the Motivation, Attention, Design (MAD) model reveals that moral outrage and high-arousal negative emotions drive the rapid online diffusion of cancel posts in a platform phenomenon called 'the outrage algorithm'. Moral grandstanding in a crowded attention economy causes moralized content to experience uncritical, viral resharing. As a consequence, machine-readable engagement rules replace traditional professional editorial and corporate communication gatekeeping, prioritizing raw emotive user interaction over deliberate and candid public discourse.

Platformed Media Theory sheds lights on the non-neutral role of X's design architecture in generating high-velocity firestorms. System mechanisms, specifically selection, datafication, and commodification, transform audience complaints into commercial products valued through engagement metrics. The platform's ranking algorithms preferentially select posts with high resharing volume, accelerating visibility regardless of sentiment quality (van Dijck et al., 2018). This structural architecture creates severe temporal compression, reducing organizational response windows and amplifying negative feedback loops.

The findings also highlight the operational boundaries of SCCT within social media environments. Traditional crisis management models assume a predictable life cycle of emergence, debate, and resolution. However, retweet velocity ensures that 90% of information propagation occurs within a compressed 10-minute window (Wang et al., 2021). This temporal acceleration collapses the conventional crisis "golden hour" into minutes, overwhelming standard corporate issue management workflows (Bentzen, 2020; Dhar & Bose, 2022). When affective publics attribute high crisis responsibility to a broadcaster, host stations often execute drastic Rebuild strategies, such as summary employee dismissals, to appease outraged digital crowds and restore reputational capital (Kennedy Ü, 2025).

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This research advances communication scholarship by examining digital shaming practices within an KEnyan urban media center, moving beyond dominant Western empirical contexts. By combining the MAD model with Platformed Media Theory The research establishes a framework for analyzing how social media platforms' opaque algorithms interact with localized normative transgressions.

For corporate communication practitioners, the study heralds a fundamental shift from reactive, one-way press statements toward proactive, two-way social listening. Organizations must align their operational values and public relations postures with the evolving ethical expectations of their platformed audiences (González Grandía, 2022; Nkrumah, 2024; Shetty, 2024). To navigate rapid-response online backlash without sacrificing internal due process, media houses must replace panic-driven communication with pre-approved crisis-escalation protocols built on the STAR model (Speed, Timing, Assurances, Remedy). Communication teams should deploy 24/7 social listening tools to their social media platforms to detect early engagement spikes, enabling leadership to issue an immediate holding statement that acknowledges public concern and outlines an investigation roadmap within minutes of a viral outbreak. All ultimate disciplinary actions must align strictly with clear, pre-existing contractual social media guidelines and statutory labour laws, ensuring that consequence management satisfies stakeholders, especially the high-power groups. Additionally, the findings identify a rehabilitation paradox that could be adopted to salvage brands from the erasures of cancel culture. While legacy media institutions enforce professional deplatforming, personalised recommendation algorithms allow cancelled personalities to rebuild independent brands on decentralised platforms like YouTube, Tik-Tok and Facebook. Power in platform societies has migrated from central stakeholders to networked public communities.

Practical Implications and Future Research Directions

Corporate communication houses and departments must update their crisis management frameworks to match the brand issues brought about by the platformed stakeholders and algorithmic moderation. Implementing real-time social listening systems enables communication teams to detect early activity spikes before criticism spirals into a corporate firestorm. Stations should establish clear, value-aligned social media policies that define formal crisis protocols under extreme temporal compression while prioritizing neutral, fact-based messaging during outrage cycles.

Future research should expand data collection beyond X to evaluate how cancel culture operates on Instagram, TikTok, Facebook or even cross-platform scenarios. Methodologically, adopting mixed-methods or quantitative designs would combine metric precision with qualitative interpretive depth. Investigating offline public opinion through focus groups and survey research would clarify whether digital firestorms reflect broader societal consensus. Longitudinal studies should track institutional policy adaptation over time, while policy-oriented research assesses regulatory frameworks for ethical platform governance.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that platform-mediated cancel culture on X functions as a high-velocity sanctioning system that fundamentally alters brand management and crisis communication within Nairobi's media ecosystem. Non-neutral platform design architectures and engagement-driven algorithms actively convert localized broadcast statements into viral corporate crises. Temporal compression collapses traditional crisis response windows, forcing media institutions into rapid, pressure-driven disciplinary actions to protect corporate reputational capital. Targeted media personalities face immediate professional deplatforming and severe financial losses. Authority in modern platform societies has shifted from central corporate gatekeepers to networked digital publics that continuously enforce moral accountability. In contexts characterised by weak institutional oversight or systemic inertia, cancel culture serves a vital democratic function as an extra-institutional mechanism of "networked justice" (Clark, 2020; Kennedy, 2025). Within African hybrid media landscapes like Kenya's, where formal regulatory bodies or judicial systems may be perceived as slow, inaccessible, or compromised, online callouts operate as digital public barazas (public meeting) that empower ordinary citizens to challenge entrenched corporate and celebrity. By bypassing traditional gatekeepers,

networked publics exercise collective agency through callouts and public shaming, forcing immediate accountability and enforcing community moral boundaries for perceived transgressions that might otherwise go unpunished. In what is seen as a paradox, algorithmic curation also creates paths for independent brand rehabilitation through direct engagement with niche online audiences.

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