


## Social media influencers' transgressions – A multimodal critical discourse analysis of canceling strategies in threaded discussion on body shaming

### *Las transgresiones de los influencers en redes sociales: Un análisis crítico del discurso multimodal sobre las estrategias de cancelación en los hilos de debate sobre body shaming*

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#### Abstract

Transgressions triggered by social media influencers' inappropriate statements lead to social media hypes. The online public arena in Romania was dominated by a 'stretch mark' scandal when a famous influencer (George Buhnici) body shamed women. His controversial remarks urged a wave of outrage in the digitalized environment. Applying a sociocultural approach to character assassination and a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, we aimed at identifying how the social media influencer (SMI) was represented in the online users' comments and how the commenters discursively represented themselves. The main findings showed that name calling, ridicule, social identity denial, and disgracing were the four main character attack strategies present in the cancellation supporters' representation of the influencer as the 'other'. In their attempt to protect the body shamer (the influencer) from losing his social capital, cancellation resisters employed minimizing, bolstering, transcendence (freedom of speech), and attacking the accuser (the canceler) as main strategies to represent the influencer as 'one of us'. Online users adopted three main roles in their discursive self-representation: delegitimizers of collective Us, experiencers, and social advisers. In the end, the study provides a threefold relationship framework for the cancellation process triggered by social media influencers' transgressions.

**Keywords:** cancel culture, influencers, crisis, discourse analysis, character assassination.

#### Resumen

*Las transgresiones provocadas por declaraciones inapropiadas de influencers en redes sociales generan revuelo en estas plataformas. La arena pública online de Rumania ha estado dominada por un escándalo de "estrias" cuando un famoso influencer (George Buhnici) avergonzó a las mujeres por su apariencia física. Sus comentarios controvertidos desataron una ola de indignación en el entorno digital. Aplicando un enfoque sociocultural al asesinato de reputación y un Análisis Crítico del Discurso Multimodal, nuestro objetivo fue identificar cómo el influencer de redes sociales (SMI) fue representado en los comentarios de los usuarios en línea y cómo los comentaristas se representaron discursivamente a sí mismos. Los principales hallazgos mostraron que el insulto, la ridiculización, la negación de la identidad social y la humillación fueron las cuatro estrategias principales de ataque al carácter presentes en la representación del influencer como el "otro" por parte de los partidarios de la cancelación. En su intento de proteger al que avergüenza los cuerpos (el influencer) de perder su capital social, los opositores a la cancelación emplearon estrategias como la minimización, el refuerzo, la transcendencia (libertad de expresión) y el ataque al acusador (el cancelador) para representar al influencer como "uno de los nuestros". Los usuarios en línea adoptaron tres roles principales en su autorrepresentación discursiva: deslegitimadores del "nosotros" colectivo, experimentadores y asesores sociales. Finalmente, el estudio proporciona un marco relacional triple para el proceso de cancelación desencadenado por las transgresiones de los influencers en redes sociales.*

**Palabras clave:** cultura de la cancelación, Influencers, crisis, análisis del discurso, asesinato de reputación.

#### Summary

1. Introduction | 2. Beyond the process of cancellation | 3. Body shaming and online hate speech | 4. Methodology | 5. Findings | 5.1. Representation of the cancellee in cancellation supporters' threaded comments | 5.2. The representation of the cancellee in the cancellation resisters' comments | 5.3. Self-representation – cancellation supporters and resisters | 6. Discussion | 7. Conclusions | References.

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## 1. Introduction

Social media influencers have evolved significantly over the years, becoming key players in digital marketing and consumer behavior. This trend is also visible in Romania. In 2024, over 100 million EURO were invested in influencer campaigns in Romania, and the number of influencers has grown by 300% since 2020 (Grozea, 2024). Research indicates that Romanian users value attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise, and similarity in influencers (Balaban & Mustăţea, 2019). Besides being involved in brand promotion for marketing campaigns, Romanian influencers also play a crucial role in crisis communication, shaping public opinion and emotional responses (Barbu & Cmeciu, 2019).

Defined as “deceptive practices or ethical violations” (Rynarzewska *et al.*, 2025, p. 414), social media influencers’ transgressions (von Mettenheim & Wiedmann, 2023), or indiscretions (Sng *et al.*, 2019) has gained significant attention in recent years, mainly as influencers play an important role in shaping consumer perceptions and brand relationship in the digital environment. Categorizing transgressions into various types, which can range from the use of swearwords, sharenting, and insulting followers to gossiping, von Mettenheim and Wiedmann (2023) highlight that they can lead to negative repercussions for both the influencer and the endorsed brand, affecting brand equity and consumer trust. Social media dynamics amplify influencer transgressions’ effects since such transgressions can become key events that may stir interest waves across different online platforms. Thus, these online events turn into what Pang *et al.* (2013, p. 333) label as netizen-generated social media hypes. Organizations should become aware that netizens empower themselves as information providers, especially during critical or controversial situations. These rapid, collective online reactions to perceived misconduct of social media influencers may lead to online firestorms that refer to intense public outcries on social media, characterized by negative word-of-mouth (Qu *et al.*, 2024). The interconnectedness of social media platforms means that a single transgression can quickly become a viral topic, leading to widespread condemnation and potential loss of endorsements. Therefore, influencer transgressions can lead to significant emotional responses, which ultimately may trigger the cancelation of the social media influencer. In the digital environment, cancel culture is seen as a process (Haskell, 2021), which implies a catalyst that triggers the cancelation, supporters, resisters, and canceling strategies.

The body shaming inflammatory statements of a well-known Romanian tech social media influencer (George Buhnici) who had a contract with the Romanian Commercial Bank was the catalyst that caused a social media hype in 2022 in Romania. While attending a music festival, he made some inappropriate remarks about women’s stretch marks and said that his wife looked like a young girl. Several days after this transgression, the Romanian SMI tried to justify his statement by emphasizing that people should prioritize their health when going to the beach and that he did not intend to encourage pedophilia when appraising his wife for her minor-like look. Despite his clarification stance on obesity as a public health issue, Buhnici had to face several public repercussions. The Romanian bank terminated the partnership agreement with the Romanian vlogger, and the National Council for Combating Discrimination (NCCD) gave him a 4000 euro fine for his statements. In this context it is clear that this online firestorm stirred an online wave of outrage expressed on social media, especially on Facebook, the most used social media platform in Romania, in the end leading to the cancelation of George Buhnici as a public and admired public figure. This specific instance of (body)shaming and character attack of the social media influencer goes in line with “cancel culture as a social trend” (Samoilenko & Jasper, 2023) that has been brought up by digital activism. The SMI’s body shaming remarks triggered a polarization between two ingroups: on the one hand, the cancelation supporters, the SMI’s opponents, those accepting body imperfection as something normal, and on the other hand, the cancelation resisters (the SMI’s supporters of bodily perfection).

Applying a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA, Machin & Mayr, 2023) on the multimodal texts present in the threaded comments of the most discussed Facebook posts on this social media hype in Romania, we will employ a corpus-assisted discourse analysis aiming (1) to identify the representation of the cancellee (SMI) as the other in the cancelation supporters’ and resisters’ comments and (2) to determine how the commenter as self is discursively represented.

## 2. Beyond the process of cancelation

Within the present media ecology, organizations employing social media influencers may be vulnerable to any attitude or behavior expressed by their endorsing content creators. Besides wielding considerable power

over consumer behavior, and brand perceptions, social media influencers' influence is not without its challenges. They often face scrutiny for their actions, which can lead to significant backlash when they engage in controversial, unethical behavior or scandals (Sng *et al.*, 2019).

The online conversation generating various waves of interest around a social media hype or online firestorm triggered by influencers' transgressions may constitute the burgeoning terrain for cancel culture. Seen as "(...) an extreme form of character assassination, in which efforts are made not only to criticize and stigmatize the target but at the same time to exclude them from the public media arenas" (Samoilenko & Jasper, 2023, p. 458), cancel culture may be directed at public figures and corporations (Mueller, 2021). Cancel culture has gained huge popularity in the past years since every person having a social media account could turn into a canceler.

Characterized by public shaming and social ostracism, cancel culture has been described as a mechanism for holding individuals accountable for their actions, particularly those in positions of influence, and initially, it focused on a "legitimate criticism of cases attracting widespread moral disapproval" (Norris, 2023, p. 149). However, cancel culture is on "a slippery slope" (Norris, 2023, p. 149), being critiqued for fostering an environment of intolerance and ideological conformity and raising questions about its impact on freedom of expression (Ng, 2020). Mueller (2021, p. 12) argues that nowadays, a shift could be observed from cancel as an "act of ostracizing another" to an act of destruction of one's future. In this line, exploring the emotional dynamics of canceling hashtags in connection to racism, Bouvier and Machin (2021) note that the moral outrage expressed in these hashtags can lead to the dehumanization of those calling out. Therefore, this aspect is significant for understanding the psychological effects of cancel culture on both the perpetrators and the community (Bouvier & Machin, 2021, p. 324).

Starting from a discursive pragmatic approach, Blitvich (2024) distinguishes between cancel culture as a broad societal phenomenon (macro level) and cancelation (meso/micro level), which refers to the specific actions taken against an individual. While cancel culture encompasses the overarching discussions and ideologies, cancelation involves the actual processes and interactions leading to an individual's loss of support. Haskell's communication model of the process of cancelation (2021) is in line with the above-mentioned discursive approach and the sociocultural perspective, which views character assassination as a process of interaction (Shirayev *et al.*, 2022; Samoilenko & Jasper, 2023) among various agents (the attacker, the target, the media, and various active audiences). This model (Haskell, 2021) highlights some requirements for such a process to occur: the presence of a catalyst, resistance, support, and canceling strategies. The process begins with a catalyst, an event or action that triggers the cancelation. This could be a public statement, behavior, or incident that raises concern among the audience. Furthermore, Haskell (2021) argues that for a cancelation to take place, there must be both support and resistance. Support comes from individuals or groups who agree with the cancelation and actively participate in it, while resistance may come from those who defend the cancellee or oppose the cancelation. The model also includes various strategies that are employed during the cancelation process. Whereas grieving, negotiation, or work canceling are among the strategies used by supporters of cancelation, resisters may appeal to debating the validity of the catalyst, discrediting the victim, or expressing support to the cancellee (Haskell, 2021, p. 84). In their study of character assassination and reputation management, Shirayev *et al.* (2022, pp. 77-85) mention several types of character attacks, which range from allegations (accusatory statements), name-calling, ridiculing, fearmongering to exposing, disgracing, or erasing. Therefore, the cancelation process emphasizes a negotiation of power (Haskell, 2021, p. 98), illustrating how online users can exert influence and bring change through collective action. According to Haskell's model (2021), one can determine if cancelation is occurring by observing the presence of the catalyst, the dynamics of support and resistance, and the strategies being employed. If these elements are evident, a cancelation is indeed taking place. At the same time, a cancelation process serves as a reflection of the values held by the community (Haskell, 2021, p. 95), particularly on social media platforms. Thus, it demonstrates what behaviors are deemed (un)acceptable.

### 3. Body shaming and online hate speech

As mentioned above, the body shaming remarks of the Romanian social media influencer served as a catalyst for his cancelation. Starting from Blitvich's (2024) idea that cancel culture should be understood as Big-C Conversation, body shaming alongside racism or sexism are issues belonging to the larger societal discourses that should be examined at the macro level.

"A popular term for a type of negative social interaction" (Schlüter *et al.*, 2023, p. 26), body shaming can be associated with a form of social policing, where individuals are publicly humiliated for perceived transgressions (Cheung, 2014), thereby reinforcing societal norms around body image and behavior. Characterized by derogatory remarks about someone's body size, shape, or overall appearance and being associated with expressions such as "appearance teasing", "trolling", and "cyberbullying" (Schlüter *et al.*, 2023), it manifests in various forms, including direct insults, negative comments on social media, or subtle forms of ridicule in everyday interactions. The normalization of body shaming and hate speech can lead to a decrease in empathy among individuals who are exposed to such content. This phenomenon triggers both individual and societal consequences. This desensitization can create a culture where body shaming and hate speech are not only tolerated but also perpetuated, emphasizing harmful beauty standards and contributing to a culture of objectification, particularly among women (Vaughan-Turnbull & Lewis, 2015).

Cassidy (2019, p. 160) considers that the dynamics of body shaming in the era of social media is based on a triangular relation involving three key participants: "the body shamer", "the body shamed", and "the audience of shame". Whereas the body shamer is the individual or group that initiates the act of body shaming, often expressing judgments about another person's body, the body shamed individual is the person who is targeted by the body shamer, experiencing the negative consequences of the shaming. The consuming viewer refers to the audience that witnesses the act of body shaming, which can include friends, family in real life, or the broader public, especially in online contexts. Cassidy (2019) notes that values are negotiated in this triangular relation. The body shamer may seek to reinforce certain societal standards or norms by shaming the individual, while the consuming viewer plays a role in either supporting or condemning the shaming behavior. This dynamic illustrates the social context in which body shaming occurs, as it is not just a private act but one that is influenced by public perception and societal expectations. Cassidy (2019, p. 158) talks about shame reversal as a form of backlash that may take place online against the body shamer. The author considers that not all participants in the triangle relation are equally affected by shame reversals. This aspect highlights the complexity of social interactions surrounding body shaming, as the consuming viewers often escape critical attention despite their role in perpetuating the cycle of shame. Therefore, this triangular relation in body shaming in the online environment is a complex interplay of actions and reactions among the body shamer, the body shamed individual, and the consuming viewers, all contributing to the broader societal conversation about body image and self-worth.

Efforts to combat body shaming and promote positive body image are increasingly important in this digital age. Body positive movements and campaigns aimed at raising awareness and fostering self-compassion among victims of body shaming have shown promise (Cohen *et al.*, 2019; Kristensen, 2023). Examining the role of social movements, such as the body positive movement, in the context of the United Nations' goals for sustainable development targeted to women's empowerment and well-being promotion, Kristensen (2023) analyses the body shaming comments directed at body neutral and confident social media activists and influencers. The author highlights a troubling trend where individuals promoting body positivity face severe backlash online. However, studies also show that not all social media interactions lead to negative outcomes, suggesting that exposure to body-positive content can mitigate the adverse effects of social media on body image. Cohen *et al.* (2019) found that viewing body-positive content on platforms like Instagram can improve mood, body satisfaction, and body appreciation among young women compared to viewing thin-ideal or appearance-neutral posts. This indicates that the type of content consumed plays a crucial role in shaping users' perceptions of their bodies, supporting the idea that body positive content can foster a healthier self-image and emotional state.

Drawing on cancelation and body shaming as processes in the digital environment, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: How is the social media influencer represented in the cancelation supporters' and resisters' comments?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: How do cancelation supporters and resisters portray themselves in the threaded discussion on body shaming?

#### 4. Methodology

"Sticks and stones do break bones, but in the case of cancel culture, words will most always hurt" (Mueller, 2021, p. 12). Following Bouvier and Machin (2021), we also add that images have the same effect as words

in cancel culture. Since this study focuses on online conversation around the social media hype triggered by the Romanian social media influencer's transgression, we will start from Cassidy (2019)'s idea that body shaming in the online environment focuses on a triangular relation. We will apply the same triangular relation in the cancelation process against the social media influencer, adopting two approaches:

- On the one hand, a multimodal critical discourse analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2023) since the online canceling process involves three main participants: the canceled (the social media influencer – the body shamer), the cancelation supporters (the online users supporting the cancelation of the social media influencer), and cancelation resisters (the online users defending the canceled and opposing the cancelation of the SMI). The analysis focuses on the discursive representation of these actors and their actions. Thus, the study will be situated at the micro level, focusing on localized interactions and specific linguistic and semiotic resources used in discussions about cancellation (Blitvich, 2024).
- On the other hand, in line with Samoilenko & Jasper (2023) and Shiraev *et al.* (2022), a sociocultural approach to character assassination focuses on various types of character attacks (name-calling, ridiculing, exposing, disgracing, or erasing).

Since the sociocultural perspective examines "the individual's social identity—or a sense who we are as members of social groups" (Shiraev *et al.*, 2022, p. 49), this study focuses on Van Dijk's (2000, p. 267) ideological square perspective where each ingroup either emphasizes the self's positive actions and expresses the other's negative actions. Therefore, this article has two main objectives: to identify the representation of the canceled as the "other" in the cancelation supporters' and resisters' comments and to determine how the commenter as "self" is discursively represented.

CrowdTangle was employed to extract all the Facebook posts embedding the word 'George Buhnici' or 'Buhnici' (the name of the social media influencer) over the period 16/07/2022 – 12/11/2022. In total, 7304 posts were extracted. The top 5 posts with the highest number of comments were retained. They were posted by the influencer's partner bank, a Romanian journalist and two media outlets. The Exportcomments tool was used to extract all comments and replies. Out of the 14408 comments and replies, only threaded comments (N = 964) were anonymized and included in the analysis. Blitvich (2024) includes user-generated comments in the genre ecology relevant to the analysis of cancellation as a meso level phenomenon. At the same time, online user threaded comments, formed of initial comments and replies, allow users to engage more meaningfully with each other's contributions. Users can directly respond to specific points raised in the parent comment or in prior replies, thus fostering a more interactive and deliberative environment (Aragón *et al.*, 2017).

Mueller (2021, p. 7) states that "text analysis of narratives leading up to call-outs for cancellation will indicate the polarity of words and phrases. Linguistic inquiry and word count software will reveal characteristic profiles among cancel culture originators". Therefore, Corpus Assisted Discourse Analysis (CADA) was employed in the analysis of the representations of the canceled, cancelation supporters, and, resisters. One of the advantages of the CADA approach is to reduce the researchers' biases (Baker, 2023, p. 33) by analyzing the corpus with specialist software. In this study, MAXQDA was employed since it provides "new ways to describe and visualize different ways of thinking, by creating simple and meaningful lists, tables, and concept maps" (de Lima, 2024, p. 33). The analysis involved six stages. The threaded comments (comments and replies) were imported into MAXQDA. MAXDictio was initially used to explore the word frequencies and word combinations (2 to 3 words) in the comment threads. MAXQDA also provides a frequency of the emojis present in the texts. Due to "their high degree of dependency on language," Zappavigna and Logi (2024, p. 2) consider that emojis make meaning "in terms of the relations they form with their co-text," emphasizing the intermodal convergence. Therefore, we also employed an analysis of emojis, thus emphasizing the multimodal dimension of the critical discourse analysis.

The second stage of the analysis focused on a concordance analysis (KWIC – Keyword-in-context) that "can be helpful in revealing evidence for discourses within texts" (Baker, 2023, p. 135). Therefore, each word, word combination, and emoji with a frequency of 5 was explored in relation to the surrounding words and emojis to understand the context better. The third stage focused on turning these words and emojis into codes, either maintaining their names or using words from a higher abstraction level as parent codes (for example, "stupid" is a form of "name calling"). De Lima (2024, p. 38) mentions that the organization of the Code System in terms of parent codes and subcodes allows the researcher "to think about the relations between the identified words".

In the fourth stage of the analysis, the analytical feature MAXMap was used, and the code co-occurrence model was activated in order to visualize how various subcodes co-occurred in the representation of the cancellee and the self-representation of the two types of users (cancellation supporters and resisters). In the fifth stage, a qualitative analysis was employed. In line with Bouvier and Machin's (2021) idea that social media texts are discursive scripts representing "participants, their motives, actions, processes, causalities, ideas, values, times and places" (p. 313) in the threaded comments under analysis, there were present various discursive scripts that involve the identity and action of the cancellee as well as the identities and actions of those representing themselves either as cancellation supporters or resisters.

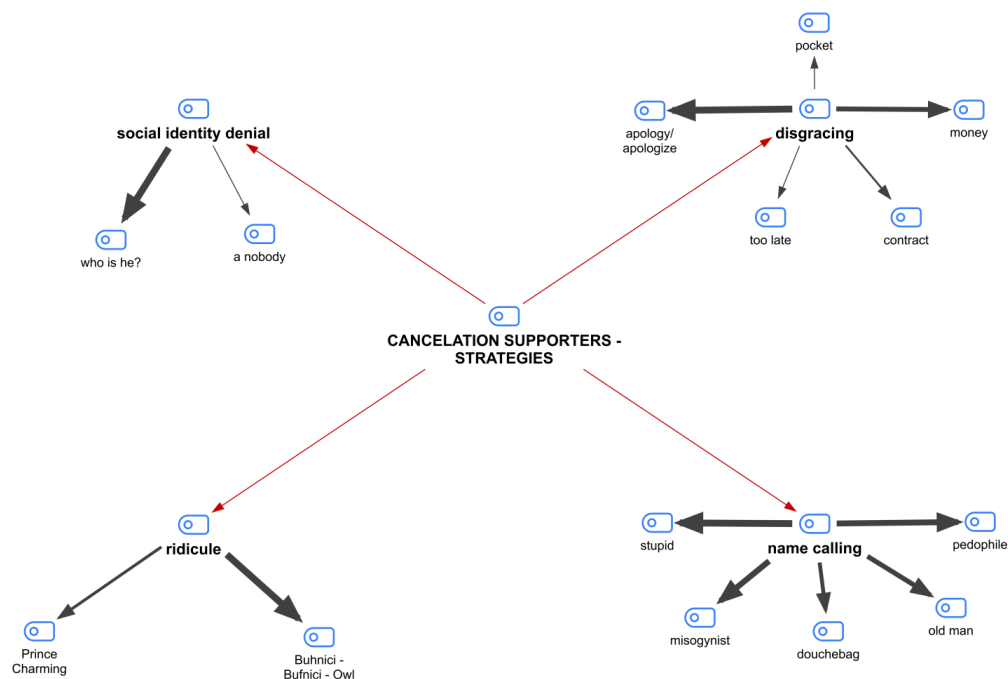
The final stage of the analysis included the visualization of a map embedding the relations within the cancellation process triggered by a social media influencer's transgression, underlying how various discursive (character attack) strategies materialized in the representations of actions and actors.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Representation of the cancellee in cancellation supporters' threaded comments

Name calling, ridicule, social identity denial, and disgracing were the four main character attack strategies identified in the cancellation supporters' comment threads. As observed in Figure 1, some words or word combinations had a higher frequency (the thickness of the line indicating a higher frequency of the code).

Figure 1. Cancellation supporters – strategies – code co-occurrence model



Source. Own elaboration. MAXQDA – MAXMaps.

*Name calling.* The cancellee, the social media influencer, is referred to in the first three strategies in terms of interpersonal dissociation through negative appraisements. Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 45) states that "social actors are appraised when they are referred to in terms which evaluate them as good or bad, loved or hated, admired or pitied". 'Stupid/ fool,' 'pedophile,' 'misogynist,' 'old man,' or 'douchebag' were the depreciative words



and word combinations employed by online users to suggest the SMI's inappropriate and objectifying attitude towards women, particularly younger women:

Threaded Comment (TC) 1: *User1 (U1)*: What intrigued me was his wife's attitude, who was delighted and turned like a rotisserie chicken in front of the camera for the "delight" of her husband as he demonstrated how she "looked like a minor." So, minors are sexy, they are a standard of femininity in the eyes of a 40+ individual who is also being promoted by organizations. *U2*: *U1* ... you know the saying "A fool is not a fool indeed if he is not strikingly cool..." 🤔😭 *U1*: *U2*, you are right.

TC 2: *U3*: *U4*, (...) The guy was probably a little distracted (kind of drunk) and didn't feel like delivering a message that wouldn't offend the fat ladies. He said it outright (...). *U4*: When he tried to compliment his wife, he did it by disregarding other women and coming across as a pedophile. The way you give compliments matters a lot. Compared to a teenager, any woman would be horrified by such a "compliment."

TC 3: *U5*: I thought married men go on vacation to relax with their wives and maybe their kids, not to ogle other women 🤔... maybe I'm old-fashioned in my thinking 🙄♀️. Mr. Buhuhuu, you should know that it's a problem if you're into underage girls (just saying 🙄♀️). *U6*: *U5*, you're funny 🤔😂😂😂. You didn't miss out on anything. Just a misogynist trying to praise his wife by putting down other women with completely inappropriate remarks.

The threaded comments in the three examples indicate a concerning normalization of the SMI of viewing women, including minors, as objects of sexual desire. The interactions among users highlight the need to challenge such harmful perspectives by promoting respect and equality. User 1 employs an instance of shame reversal targeted to the SMI's wife by comparing her to "a rotisserie chicken". The Romanian idiomatic expression ("A fool is not a fool indeed if he is not strikingly cool") in example 1 associates the SMI's lack of good judgment with overconfidence and arrogance, while the combination of the See-No-Evil Monkey and Crying Face emojis suggests the user's disapproval of the SMI's body shaming attitude.

Threaded comment 3 starts with some normative assumptions about socially acceptable marital behavior, the SMI being excluded from this generic representation of married men's behavior on vacation. He is instead associated with the generic type of 'misogynist' persons. The commenters overtly express their moral disengagement from what could be characterized as a patriarchal ideology, namely the deeply ingrained beliefs about toxic superior masculinity through the overt or subtle expression of body shaming remarks.

The interplay of Thinking Face, Woman Shrugging, and Female Symbol emojis in example 3 conveys a humorous tone through sarcasm. User 5 mimics her doubts about changing social norms. This sarcastic instance is enhanced by the Rolling on the Floor Laughing and Face with Tears of Joy emojis present in the comment of user 6, who finds his interlocutor's intervention funny.

*Ridicule*. The nomination 'Mr. Buhuhuu' in user 5's comment coincides with the Romanian onomatopoeia of the noise made by an owl. Ridicule, as a strategy focused on instances of ad hominem attacks, materialized in terms of anthropomorphism through insulting physical identification of George Buhnici as 'Prince Charming' or as 'owl.' The usage of the owl is part of a play upon words, the SMI family name (Buhnici) resembling the Romanian word for owl (bufniță). Therefore, the users wanted to represent the SMI as a bird of prey by employing a heuristic evaluation.

*Social identity denial*. 'Who is he?' and 'a nobody' were the main word combinations that could be associated with the third character attack strategy employed by cancellation supporters:

TC 4: *U7*: *U8*, who is this George Buhnici? 🤔 I have no clue about influencers and their opinions. 🤔 *U8*: *U7*, he is just a loser who calls himself an influencer. *U7*: *U8*, so a nobody.

Threaded comment 4 shows a conversation where users ask themselves who Buhnici is, thus denying any relational process that might present the canceled as an influencer. According to Machin and Mayr (2023), relational processes are commonly expressed through the verbs 'to be' and 'to have' allowing the interlocutor "to represent things as immutable facts". The comments above express the contrary situation. The online users deny the representation of the canceled through functionalization, a referral to a social actor "in terms of an activity (...), of something they do (...), an occupation or role" (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 42). Whereas user 7's comment shows cynicism towards the influencer industry and perceived inauthenticity, questioning the

legitimacy of self-proclaimed influencers, user 8's words reflect a dismissive attitude characterizing the influencer as a 'loser' and a 'nobody'.

*Disgracing.* Described as "consciously pursuing the loss of respect, honor, or esteem of another person," disgracing "happens through the practice of shaming, which is public humiliation of the target to punish them for their perceived misdeeds." (Shiraeve *et al.*, 2022, pp. 83-85). In the cancellation supporters' threaded comments, the most frequent words and word combinations were: 'no apology'/'not apologize(d)', 'no money,' 'loss of'/'no contract(s)', 'money in pockets.'

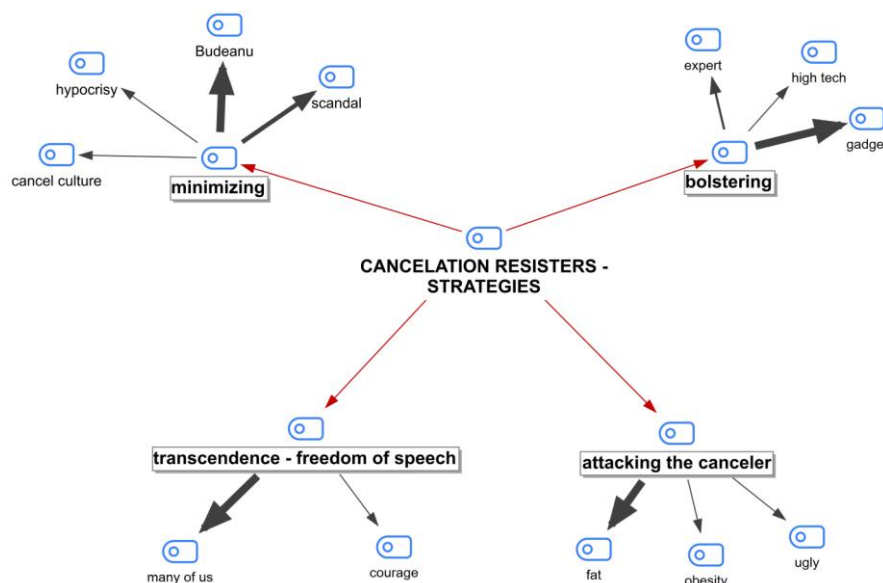
TC 5: U9: Did he say when the remorse started appearing, after how many lost contracts? U10: U9, exactly, if he were sincere, he would have apologized immediately, not after losing contracts. U11: U9, Well, that's why he regrets it, he's losing money and credibility.

Example 5 was the second discussion thread with the highest number of interactions (113 replies), and the opening sequence (user 9's comment) had 3378 likes. This high engagement shows online users' interest in the social media influencer's way of acting in the crisis triggered by his inappropriate remarks. Material processes, focusing on actions, describe processes of doing (Machin & Mayr, 2023). Moreover, it is precisely this material process of belated reaction that users criticized. Mueller (2021, p. 11) states that "apology is the root of cancel culture," his study emphasizing the idea that if someone is accused, that person must apologize immediately. The threaded comments reflect commenters' moral judgment on the SMI's character and behavior in this crisis situation. Labeling him as dishonest, online users denounce his accountability avoidance and consider that financial concerns drove his delayed remorse, as his partners had started terminating their contracts with him.

## 5.2. The representation of the canceled in the cancellation resisters' comments

Although outnumbered by those supporting Buhnici's cancellation, the resisters try to protect the canceled (the body shamer) from losing his social capital. The most frequent words and word combinations emphasized four main strategies (Figure 2) that resemble the crisis response strategies in the crisis communication literature (Coombs, 2019): minimizing, bolstering, transcendence (freedom of speech), and attacking the accuser (the canceler).

Figure 2. Cancellation resisters – strategies – code co-occurrence model



Source. Own elaboration. MAXQDA – MAXMaps.



*Minimizing* as a form of diminishment posture in crisis communication (Coombs, 2019) focuses on a social actor's attempt to persuade the audience that an action is less serious than presented (Shiraev *et al.*, 2022, p. 141). 'Scandal,' 'hypocrisy,' 'cancel culture,' or 'Budeanu' were the words and word combinations used by the online users who tried to defend Buhnici, highlighting that cancelation had gone too far.

TC6: U13: (...) the scandal has gotten way too far. Other public figures insult much more and aren't criticized so fiercely. Well, this time, it was about the fair and sensitive sex, which he had offended a bit. All's well that ends well. U14: U13, What can you do if you don't make a mountain out of a molehill, it doesn't have the same impact. But... when they show off their implants, each more horrible and bigger than the other, no one gets offended. Well, there you go!

Employing polarity (Buhnici versus other public figures), the two users in threaded comment 6 denounce a double standard applied to celebrities and controversies. Buhnici is portrayed as a victim of media scrutiny, media amplifying and shaping the public discourse around his body shaming. The overall tone suggests a sense of resignation and frustration obtained through an implicit generalization towards the Romanian society associated with societal complacency. Accused of displaying inconsistent application of moral standards, Romanians are considered to apply selective outrage in prioritizing certain inappropriate behaviors over others.

The double standard is also mentioned in threaded comment 7, the discussion centering around gender dynamics and perceptions of masculinity. But this time, individualization is employed through the mentioning of a Romanian female social media influencer (Dana Budeanu) who has apparently offended men's sense of masculinity. The public opinion had not the same canceling reaction as it did with Buhnici. The conversation in example 7 shows that cancelation is associated with moral relativism, with the two users emphasizing that moral evaluations are subjective and context-dependent.

TC7: U15: But what about Dana Budeanu, who insults our masculinity—what can we men even say about that? You women got all fired up, but there's some truth to it in the end. 😂😂😂. U16: U15, he may be right. But who are we to judge others?

*Bolstering.* 'Expert,' 'high tech,' or 'gadget' were three words employed to reinforce Buhnici's expertise in technology. The bolstering posture focuses on reminding the good deeds of a social actor involved in a crisis (Coombs, 2019). However in threaded comment 8, Buhnici's portrayal as smart and well-informed is closely linked to gender stereotyping. Representing women as generic types, user 17 expresses a dismissive and misogynistic attitude, emphasizing that women are not capable of understanding technology. The Winking Face emoji and the user 18's agreement reinforce the user's sarcastic form of subtle sexism.

TC 8: U17: George Buhnici, leave women alone and stick to high-tech gadgets which made you famous! High-tech technology can be understood—women, not so much! 😏 U18: U17, You are right!

*Transcendence – freedom of speech.* Claiming transcendence by evoking more significant values in a specific situation (Benoit, 2015, p. 30) is an important strategy when the topic under discussion is framed in a broader context. Example 9 is part of the discussion thread whose opening sequence triggered the highest number of interactions (N=115). It lays an emphasis on the challenges of freedom of speech as part of self-expression on social media. The pronouns 'us,' 'we,' and the verb 'think' show a sense of collective interest in this issue and an access to some mental process that might foster a sense of identification with the influencer represented as a courageous individual. However, the dialogue shows antagonism between commenters as well. One side praises individuality by expressing one's opinions while the other side distinguishes between having a thought and voicing it.

TC 9: U19: Many of us think like Buhnici 😂, yet few of us have the courage to say it publicly 😊. U20: U19, very well said. U21: U19, few of you? All of you express freely on Facebook. U22: U19, thinking is one thing, talking is another! This makes the difference!!

*Attacking the accuser.* In crisis communication, attacking the accuser is considered a way of reducing the offensiveness, the social actor counterattacks by questioning the accusers' credibility (Benoit, 2015, p. 30).

'Fat' and 'ugly' were the most frequent words that cancelation resisters employed to portray the cancelers. This type of physical identification through negative evaluations emphasizes systemic discrimination by underlying broader societal norms that perpetuate body-based prejudice. Trivializing the concerns of those affected by Buhnici's inappropriate remarks, the two cancelation resisters in threaded comment 10 agree with the normative ideals of beauty that the Romanian SMI has previously mentioned.

TC 10: U23: The fat, ugly ones, and frustrated and angry ones have won! Anyway, even though he apologized, you'll still remain ugly, fat, with stretch marks and cellulite 😊 U24: U23, All the fat ones are offended, as if Buhnici force-fed them... What's bothering you, I don't get it...!? That we're not looking at you...?!

### 5.3. Self-representation – cancelation supporters and resisters

#### 5.3.1. Cancelation resisters – delegitimizers of collective US

The two types of actors use different strategies to self-represent themselves. Employing generalization, cancelation resisters refer to a 'collective us.' Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 69) emphasizes that generalization is "an important issue in critical discourse analysis, as texts which are mainly concerned with legitimizing or delegitimizing actions and reactions tend to move high up on the generalization scale."

Threaded comment 11 shows that cancelation resisters actually assume a position of delegitimizing the 'collective us'. The online users criticize normalizing gossiping behavior as a national trait of Romanians. They suggest that the incident was blown out of proportion, with excessive commentary and criticism from others. It is interesting to observe that this cultural self-reflection is obtained through an implicit exclusion from the inclusive 'us' that is associated with national hypocrisy. This threaded comment also reflects an instance of moral relativism, suggesting that no one is perfect and that everyone can make mistakes. Depreciative evaluation such as 'idiots' highlights incivility and insults, a characteristic observed in social media discourse focusing on call-outs (Bouvier & Machin, 2021).

TC11: U25: Where's the slip-up?!... The man is at a concert... relaxed, amused, sincere, with his wife and friends, they were having fun...

U26: U25, only the nation's idiots have issues with Buhnici. U27: U25, nobody is a saint. There's been a bit of an overreaction with all these comments. Seriously, we all gossip about each other. That's just how we are as a nation. Big deal. The guy was just euphoric...

#### 5.3.2. Cancelation supporters – the role of experiencers

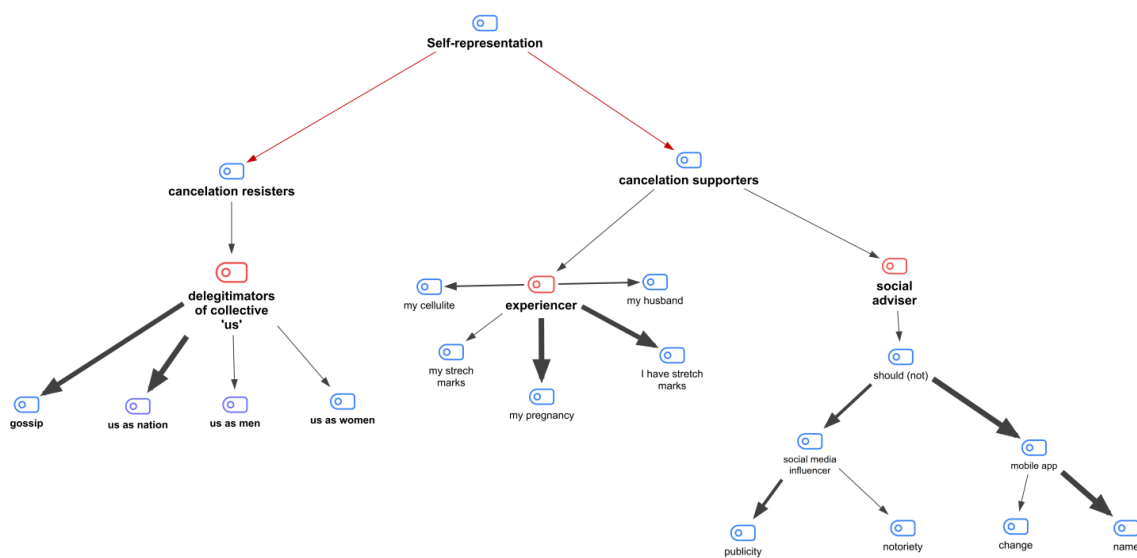
The frequency of words and word combinations (Figure 3) shows that cancelation supporters assume two main roles: experiencer expressed through word combinations such as 'my stretch marks,' 'my cellulite,' 'my pregnancy,' 'my husband' and social adviser expressed through words such as 'should (not),' 'name,' 'change,' 'social media influencer,' or 'notoriety'.

The presence of first person personal pronouns and possessive pronouns highlights personalization of personal authority as an instance of legitimizing social practices (Van Leeuwen, 2008). Example 12 is the second threaded comment with the highest number of likes (N = 2186), triggering 355 interactions. The sequence opening embeds humor and sarcasm through stretch mark agency ("My stretch marks don't accept your apologies"). As observed, most of the interlocutors in this thread show a feminine solidarity with the online user. Promoting body positivity, the first online users employ a defensive tone, being critical of the SMI's judgment of women's bodies.

TC 12: U27: My stretch marks don't accept your apologies. U28: U27, neither does my belly! U29: U27, nor do mine. U30: U27, nor does my cellulite!! 😊

U31: U27, nor does my cellulite... U32: U27, all the "fat girls" are offended as if Buhnici force-fed them... What exactly is bothering you?! That we're not looking at you?! U33: U32, Ewwwwwww, I don't know if anyone would want to be looked at by you 🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢🤢

Figure 3. Self-representation of cancelation resisters and supporters – code co-occurrence model



Source. Own elaboration. MAXQDA – MAXMaps.

Antagonism is also present in the dialogue between users 32 and 33, which shows a perpetuation of the harmful stereotypes present in the SMI's initial remarks, with user 32 offending women for their physical appearance. This dehumanization by reducing individuals to their physical characteristics and denying their dignity is countered with a verbal expression of disgust through the onomatopoeia ('Ewwwww'). The last comment also embeds a sequence of emojis. As Zappavigna and Logi (2024, p. 129) suggest, emoji repetitions intensify interpersonal meanings, up-scaling a certain attitude. The verbal outrage is reinforced visually by the concurrence of the repeated Nauseated Face and Face Vomiting emojis that emphasize a negative attitude towards the offending user.

### 5.3.3. Cancellation supporters – the role of social advisers

The high frequency of the word combination 'should (not)' (N =75) shows that online users assume the role of social advisers who provide some normative appeals. Glozer *et al.* (2019, p. 639) suggest that these normative appeals "contribute to legitimation processes by presenting a professed (superior) moral high ground on matters of legitimacy." The online practice of advice giving was targeted at two levels (Figure 3): organizational level and SMI level.

Although the name of the bank mobile app was not derived from the name of the influencer, threaded comments 13 and 14 illustrate the controversy around the name of this app. The dominance of words such as '(re)name,' 'change,' or 'mobile app' highlights that in the context of the SMI transgression, name resemblance could be a disadvantage for the banking organization. Therefore, online users use deontic modality as an expression of obligation obtained through imperative type (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 618), urging the bank to change the mobile app name. Conveyed in a humorous tone, these suggestions may be interpreted as a sign of patriotism through linguistic preferences. The online users' prioritization of Romanian-sounding names over foreign ones and usage of the Romanian Flag emoji highlight the expression of Romanian national pride and identity.

TC 13: U34: As a sign of protest, you should change the name of the George app too. 😊 U35: U34, The name George will be excluded in the future even more than Vladimir! 😊

TC 14: U36: Since it's a holiday today, change the app name from George to Ilie.

U37: U36, yes!!! Romanian!!! Love it 🇷🇴👉❤️ Voicu or maybe Ilinca?

The debate on the role of social media influencers in society shows a divergent opinion among cancelation supporters as social advisers. Examples 15 and 16 show the divide that the concept of notoriety has brought in the Romanian society. On the one hand, there are those online users who link notoriety with accountability, public figures being held responsible for their statements. On the other hand, some online users claim that judging someone's character on a single statement may lead to oversimplification.

TC 15: U38: Congratulations, BCR! Every public figure in Romania must understand that notoriety doesn't mean impunity but responsibility. He could have acknowledged his misstep and apologized publicly—but he didn't. U39: U38, Why should he apologize? For saying what he thinks? For speaking the truth? George did what any normal person should do when accused of something: he stepped up and assumed his words. The rest is up to each person to handle whether they can deal with the truth or not. U40: U39, to tolerate the pedophilic preferences of someone who's hideous inside and out? 😬

U41: U40, "Pedophilic preferences"? Wtf? The man made a joke about his wife, directed at his wife. Hideous? Do you know him well enough to label someone like that?

U42: U41, Yes, a grown man over 40 doesn't make such "jokes," especially as a public figure in a modern society. Obviously, many of you are so used to and complicit in this attitude toward us, siding with the "aggressor." There's a long way to go, but fortunately, BCR has shown they're a company in 2022, and for that, I thank them.

TC 16: U43: The man got exactly what he aimed for: publicity. In the world of influencers, the most important thing is to be known. And scandal—bread and circuses—is the perfect recipe to make yourself known in Romania. Congratulations, Buhnici! 🍷 Following this scandal, his notoriety has reached its peak, and I'm sure many contracts will follow with brands that want to use influencers in their campaigns. U44: U43, here's how things work in Romania: Scandal 🍷 = publicity 🍷 = notoriety 🍷 = lots of contracts 💰 = money 💰. If you know what I mean. 😊

Threaded comment 16 brings into discussion online users' skepticism and disillusionment towards the influencer industry. Scandal and controversy are mentioned as main ingredients of a Romanian pattern leading to publicity, notoriety, and profitable contracts. Accompanied by suggestive emojis, user 44's comment reflects a relational process highlighting that monetization of influencer culture turns notoriety into lucrative business opportunities.

## 6. Discussion

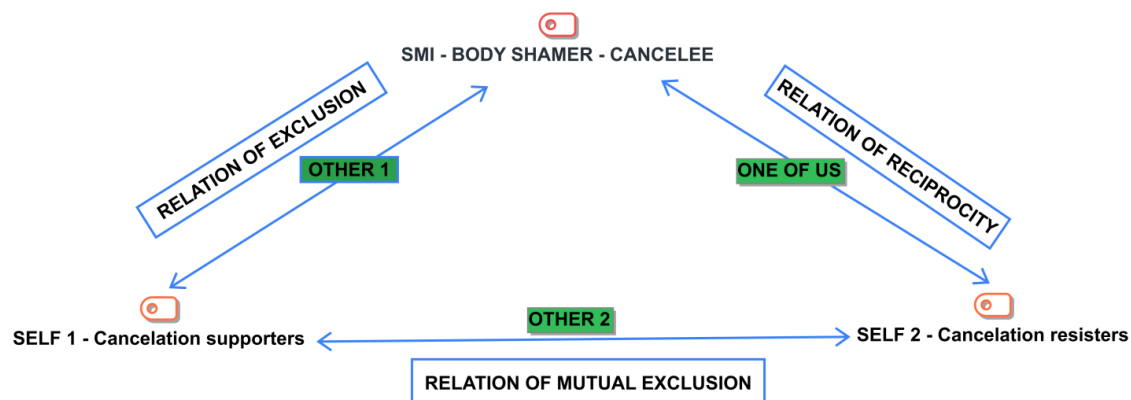
"Canceling has become the most modern form of public shaming in a hyper-aware global digital community" (Mueller, 2021, p. 12). This phenomenon of ostracism has emerged as a significant topic of discourse in the digital age, mainly when targeted towards celebrities or influencers due to their transgressions. Alongside racism, homophobia, or bullying, body shaming as a form of sexism constitutes one of the reasons for canceling individuals.

The literature (Cassidy, 2019; Haskell, 2021) showed that in the online environment both canceling and body shaming are processes that involve a complexity of social interactions between several participants. Whether we talk about a body shamer, a body shamed, and consuming viewers (Cassidy, 2019) or about cancelation supporters and resisters (Haskell, 2021), the concepts of 'self' and 'other' are present. Therefore, this study has brought a national perspective on cancel culture that should be seen as a process. The analysis focused

on the consuming viewers, both cancellation supporters and resisters, of the social media hype triggered by a Romanian social media influencer's body shaming statements.

The findings are discussed in terms of a threefold relationship (Figure 4) underlying the cancellation process targeted towards a SMI who started as a body shamer and ended up as a canceler.

Figure 4. Cancellation process in SMIs' transgressions



Source. Own elaboration. MAXQDA – MAXMaps.

Firstly, the cancellation process starts with a *relation of exclusion*. The first instance of the "other" is activated by the cancellation supporters. It is related to the canceled, the social media influencer as a body shamer who is excluded from the ingroup of cancellation supporters. In line with previous research on character assassination (Samoilenko & Jasper, 2023), Romanian online users employed name calling, ridicule, and social identity denial to distance themselves from what could be labeled as a societal complicity where a concerning normalization of certain social norms around body image is reinforced (Cheung, 2014; Schlüter *et al.*, 2023).

Although there is a debate on what incivility is, Masullo Chen *et al.* (2019) state that "research shows that incivility is in the eye of the beholder." We consider that the Romanian online users' lexical choices through negative appraisements (depreciative evaluative adjectives or ad hominem arguments) resemble a discourse of incivility and aggression that is "antithetical to accord and usually stands in violation of social norms" (Ifeanyichukwu, & Hoffman, 2025, p. 4).

Contrary to these attack strategies that may seem uncivil, other online users employ disgracing as a strategy to criticize the social media influencer's accountability avoidance rationally. The role of apology in cancel culture has been debated in the literature. Whereas Bouvier and Machin (2021, p. 317) indicate that apologies for outbursts are "an evidence of inauthenticity and flawed character and often used as fuel for humor and brutal sarcasm," Mueller (2021) argues that immediate apology is a key predictor of involvement in cancel culture. Our findings showed that Romanian online users expected SMI's immediate apology, which is in line with an efficient crisis communication response (Benoit, 2015; Coombs, 2019), but the delayed apologies were refused, leading to the strategy of disgracing.

Secondly, a *relation of reciprocity* is present in the cancellation process. The canceled is perceived as "one of us" by the cancellation resisters. Denouncing double standards and moral relativism and portraying the canceled as a victim of media scrutiny, some Romanian online users employed minimizing as a strategy to diminish the SMI's transgression. The analysis of online users' threaded comments emphasized the argument of moral evaluations as subjective, an idea that resonates with Haidt's (2012) assertion that people apply different moral standards based on personal beliefs and cultural contexts. Therefore, minimization as a strategy to support the canceled suggests that public outrage can be selective, influenced by the specific circumstances surrounding each social media hype. Besides minimizing, online users employ transcendence as a crisis communication strategy to downplay the severity of the SMI's action to mitigate backlash. Appealing to freedom of speech, the commenters praised the SMI's courage by portraying him as a hero and by emphasizing their desire for

self-identification with him. This argument of cancelation resisters is in line with previous research (Haskell, 2021), where questioning the validity of the catalyst is mentioned by the canceled's supporters.

The same discourse of incivility was also found in the cancelation resisters' threaded comments. The negative physical evaluations of the outgroup members (cancelation supporters) underscore a pervasive discrimination rooted in societal conventions that sustain biases associated with physical appearance. The presence of interpersonal dissociation from the other through negative appraisements (Van Leeuwen, 2008) in both cancelation resisters and supporters is consistent with research by Meyer *et al.* (2019), which shows that in online threaded user comments, both ingroup and outgroup members ridicule the opponent as a way of delegitimizing the other's claims.

Thirdly, the cancelation process ends with a *relation of mutual exclusion*, the instance of a second "other" being activated. This relation highlights the dominance of collaboration with other-liked minded people in threaded comments (Meyer *et al.*, 2019), thus excluding any form of cooperation with persons who have different opinions. This type of relation applies to both cancelation supporters and resisters who form their own echo chambers. Cancelation resisters adopt an exclusion position from a collective 'us'. Engaging in cultural self-reflection, they critique the normalization of gossip as a Romanian trait. This delegitimizing of a collective Us is contrary to what Bouvier and Machin (2021, p. 318) found in their analysis of cancel culture hashtags where the plural pronouns indicated "a sense of imagined collective interest." The inclusion versus exclusion cleavage is determined by the collective behavior associated with the group. In this case, gossiping is not seen as a bonding mechanism (Conein, 2011) but rather as a source of conflict within the Romanian cultural context. The acknowledgment of moral relativism among cancelation resisters reflects broader themes in discourse analysis. Van Dijk (2000) emphasizes how individuals navigate moral judgments in social contexts. As the findings showed, cancelation resisters suggested that everyone can make mistakes, thus highlighting a shared understanding of human fallibility.

On the other hand, cancelation supporters reject any form of civilized debate with resisters and adopt a position of superiority by assuming the roles of experiences and social advisers in calling out the body shamer. Embracing body positivity, these online users claim credibility through personal experience, providing humorous instances of stretch mark agency. This usage of personal authority as an argument is consistent with research by Breeze (2021, p. 5), which showed that online users employ this discursive strategy providing "first-hand experience as potential source of trustworthy information." The social adviser role constitutes another form of empowerment of online users in the digital environment. Research by Glozer *et al.* (2019, p. 639) indicates that the commenters' normative appeals act as a collective "moral compass".

## 7. Conclusions

This study explores the dynamics of cancel culture, focusing on a Romanian social media influencer's transgression. The timing, context, and nature of the transgression play crucial roles in shaping audience reactions, while the rapid dissemination of information on social media can exacerbate the effects of misconduct. Brands that have contracts with social media influencers must proactively manage their relationships with influencers and address any transgressions to maintain consumer trust and loyalty. This article reiterated the impact that SMIs' transgressions can have on the consuming viewers, as important participants in the triangular relation of body shaming (Cassidy, 2019). The analysis showed a clear polarization between cancelation supporters, advocating for body positivity, and cancelation resisters, often upholding ideals of bodily perfection, promoting an "objectification of women" (Enache *et al.*, 2022, p. 59). This division reflects broader societal attitudes towards body image and social media influencers.

The main contribution of this study is the proposed framework of the cancelation process in SMIs' transgressions. Employing a multimodal critical discourse analysis and a corpus-assisted discourse analysis, this article highlights how the three main participants (the SMI – the canceled – the body shamer, cancelation supporter, and cancelation resisters) are represented in the exclusion, reciprocity, and mutual exclusion relationships present in the threaded discussion triggered by the Romanian SMI's inappropriate statements on body shaming. Personal distancing ("my stretch marks") from the SMI versus personal identification ("one of us") with the SMI plays a significant role in how online users respond to cancel culture. The analysis of the multimodal threaded comments revealed the importance of including emojis in understanding verbal interpersonal meanings since they upscale online users' attitudes (Zappavigna & Logi, 2024). The identification



of cancelation strategies has a twofold implication. On the one hand, identifying these various strategies employed by cancelation supporters and resisters enhances the understanding of how online users navigate the complexities of online discourse and the sociocultural norms surrounding body shaming. Therefore, brands that employ influencers should monitor public perception and educate influencers on sociocultural sensitivity in order to mitigate risks and potential crises. On the other hand, the findings suggest that influencers are held to high standards of moral conduct, and any perceived indiscretion can lead to severe repercussions, including cancelation. This reflects broader societal expectations regarding moral behavior and accountability in public figures. Therefore, these discursive strategies may serve as lessons for social media influencers who should mitigate online transgressions before they turn into online backlash, ultimately leading to the SMI's loss of social capital.

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**Brief CV of the author**

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**Conflict of interests**

The author confirms having declared no conflict of interests.