

Integrating Critical Thinking in Social Studies Education to Understand Social Change and Cancel Culture

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Abstract

In an increasingly digitalized and globalized world, social studies education plays a pivotal role in shaping students' critical thinking and understanding of social change. This study explores how social studies can be a platform for addressing contemporary issues, particularly the phenomenon of Cancel Culture. By referring to sources indexed in Scimago Journal & Country Rank (SJR) and Science and Technology Index (SINTA), the research emphasizes the urgency of integrating innovative learning methods. The findings show that critical thinking, interdisciplinary strategies, and the integration of technology empower students to analyze complex social phenomena. Social studies teachers are essential in facilitating meaningful discussions that highlight the impact of globalization, individualization, and digital transformation. Ultimately, fostering critical thinking within social studies not only deepens students' understanding of social realities but also prepares them to act as reflective, ethical, and responsible agents of change in an ever-evolving society.

Keywords: *Cancel Culture; Social Studies Pedagogy; Critical Thinking Competencies; Societal Transformation; Digital Technology Integration;*

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of Cancel Culture represents society's response to actions deemed controversial or violating certain values, often involving public figures or celebrities. This trend has become prevalent in the era of social media, where individuals have platforms to express opinions, criticism, or even public condemnation toward others perceived to have acted inappropriately or harmfully. The impacts of Cancel Culture are extensive. While it can serve as a form of social accountability or resistance against harmful behavior, it also brings significant consequences—not only affecting careers and reputations, but also the emotional and mental well-being of the targeted individuals (Amalina et al., 2023; Mardeson & Mardesci, 2022; Purnamasari, 2022).

Cancel Culture is closely linked to contemporary issues such as human rights, politics, and cultural values. Cases often involve accusations of discrimination, misinformation, or violations of cultural norms. However, this phenomenon also sparks debates around the boundaries of freedom of expression, justice, and the ethics of public condemnation. While intended as a response to wrongdoing, Cancel Culture may result in disproportionate consequences or hinder opportunities

for deeper dialogue and understanding (Juniman, 2023; Kurniawan et al., 2022; Mardeson & Mardesci, 2022).

This phenomenon presents both challenges and opportunities in the field of education. One of the main challenges lies in the urgent need for digital literacy development among students and teachers. Digital literacy goes beyond technical skills; it encompasses the ability to evaluate information critically, think reflectively, and communicate responsibly. Cancel Culture demands these competencies as both students and educators must navigate information wisely, respect differing perspectives, and understand the risks of online behaviors such as cyberbullying and intolerance (Mustofa & Budiwati, 2019; Nosivellila et al., 2023).

At the same time, Cancel Culture offers significant opportunities to raise social awareness. Education can leverage this phenomenon to foster sensitivity to social issues, including human rights, politics, and culture. Through open discussions, dialogue, and constructive debates, students can expand their understanding of diverse worldviews and develop tolerance. With the right pedagogical strategies, education can prepare students and teachers to deal with the complexities of Cancel Culture by promoting digital literacy and social consciousness, equipping them to engage more wisely in today's dynamic digital environment (Akhiruddin et al., 2019; Mueller, 2021; Zahro, 2023).

Jack Mezirow's theory of transformative learning, which emphasizes shifts in perspective and meaning-making through critical reflection, is highly relevant in the context of Cancel Culture. This theory encourages learners to reassess their assumptions and engage in deep self-examination. Applied to Cancel Culture, it invites individuals to critically reflect on their reasons for participating in or reacting to such movements and the impact their actions may have on others and the wider community. It promotes questioning the moral implications and foundations of such responses while fostering empathy, dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving (Falaq et al., 2022; Haryadi, 2015).

Incorporating transformative learning into social studies education offers a deeper lens to examine Cancel Culture, providing a framework for analyzing its emotional, psychological, and social dimensions. It also enables students to develop more inclusive and critical approaches to controversy and social conflict.

Likewise, Habermas' theory of communicative rationality is highly applicable to Cancel Culture, which often unfolds in public spaces such as social media. This theory stresses the importance of open, honest, and undistorted communication in achieving mutual understanding and meaningful social action. In the context of Cancel Culture, it advocates for inclusive dialogue where individuals listen to one another without coercion or misrepresentation. It supports the expression of diverse experiences and perspectives in fair and just ways (Nuris, 2016; Watloly, 2016).

Habermas also highlights the necessity of sincerity, truthfulness, and justice in communication. Cancel Culture, with its potential for distortion through stereotypes, hasty judgments, or mass pressure, can undermine these communicative ideals. Applying this theory underscores the importance of just and empathetic interaction, urging a more rational, democratic, and participatory response to social controversies (Gabur, 2023; Setyabudi & Hasibuan, 2017).

Understanding Cancel Culture and contemporary issues is crucial for students, as it fosters critical thinking, effective communication, and broadened socio-political awareness. Social studies serves as a fitting platform for this purpose, offering conceptual, theoretical, and empirical tools to explore complex social realities. Through participatory and interactive learning methods, students are engaged in discussions, debates, and social action.

Cancel Culture intersects with core values such as humanity, justice, and human rights. It reflects value conflicts within society that can have either constructive or detrimental outcomes. Social studies helps students assess these implications, teaching them to distinguish between proportionate, rational, and humanistic responses versus actions that may lead to discrimination or unfair judgment. When guided appropriately, Cancel Culture can become a tool for education, correction, and positive social change (Marinovic et al., 2022; Segal, 2021).

This study identifies a gap in the literature regarding how social studies education addresses Cancel Culture. Accordingly, the research formulates two main questions: (1) How can social studies develop students' critical thinking skills in understanding and responding to Cancel Culture? (2) How can social studies provide insights into social change in relation to Cancel Culture?. The uniqueness of this research lies in its effort to bridge the gap by offering new contributions, including insights into how social studies can influence students' attitudes, behaviors, and competencies in confronting Cancel Culture. It presents practical recommendations for educators, schools, and stakeholders in designing, implementing, and evaluating social studies instruction that addresses the complexities of this phenomenon.

METHODS

This study employed a systematic literature review by narrowing the scope of keyword searches to Cancel Culture, contemporary issues, social studies education, and social media. The search strategy involved journal indexing platforms such as Scimago Journal & Country Rank (SJR) and the Science and Technology Index (SINTA). The search process was conducted from September 2024 to February 2025. The selection process for included and excluded studies followed a sequence of screening, reading, and identifying study titles and abstracts.

In SINTA, filters were applied to select journals ranked SINTA 1, SINTA 2, and SINTA 3 in the fields of education, humanities, and social sciences (yielding 907 journals). These were further narrowed down to journals relevant to social studies education (2 journals), general education (181 journals), educational studies (7 journals), and communication (15 journals). Within each relevant journal, the following keywords were used: Cancel Culture, contemporary issues, social studies education, and social media.

Similarly, in SJR, the filter used was social education, yielding 23 journals. These were screened based on their relevance, and the same keywords were applied to refine the selection. Studies that fell outside the scope of the research focus were excluded. The study selection process consisted of: (1) Identification of titles, authors, and abstracts (2) Screening of research articles, especially focusing on research objectives, methods, and results (3) Evaluation of whether studies were included or excluded (4) Final determination regarding the eligibility of the selected studies.

FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

Relevant research data/articles/studies concerning digital literacy in the context of education from 2017 to 2023 were collected. These were organized into a table and further elaborated in the discussion section. The following is a list of several related articles:

Table 1. < List of Analyzed Articles >

No	Author	Title	Year
1	Eko Heri Widiastuti	Pemanfaatan Lingkungan Sebagai Sumber Pembelajaran Mata Pelajaran IPS	(2017)
2	Dwi Nanda Akhmad Romadhon	Implementasi Keterampilan Berpikir Kritis pada Pembelajaran IPS pada Jenjang Sekolah Menengah Pertama sebagai Eksistensi Meningkatkan Keterampilan Abad 21	(2019)
3	Septi Kuntari	Relevansi Pendidikan Ips Dalam Arus Globalisasi	(2019)
4	Ema Dwi Astuti	Pengaruh Model Pembelajaran Berbasis Masalah Terhadap Kemampuan Berpikir Kritis Dan Prestasi Belajar	(2020)
5	Didit Nantara	Menumbuhkan Berpikir Kritis Pada Siswa Melalui Peran Guru Dan Peran Sekolah	(2021)
6	Ade Stefani Setyaningsih	Inovasi Guru Dalam Pembelajaran Abad 21 Berbasis Teknologi Informasi	(2022)
7	Yushar Tanjung, Mhd Ihsan Syahaf Nasution,	Integrasi Isu-Isu Sosial Kekinian dalam Pembelajaran IPS: Sebuah Analisis Relevansi	(2022)

No	Author	Title	Year
8	Hafnita Sari Dewi Lubis, Anju Nofarof Hasudungan, Surya Aymanda Nababan Theresya Wulandari, Ketut Prasetyo	Pengaruh Kemampuan Komunikasi Interpersonal Dan Kemampuan Berpikir Kritis Terhadap Hasil Belajar Pada Mata Pelajaran IPS	(2023)
9	Lutfiatuz Zahro	Peran Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial Dalam Membantu Siswa Memahami Dinamika Sosial Masyarakat Kontemporer	(2023)
10	Siti Irene Astuti Dwiningrum, Safi tri Yosita Ratri, Rukiyati, Annisa Setyaningrum, Ebni Sholikhah, Nopita Sitompul, Anindita Ayu Nisa Utami	Embracing Digital Literacy Through School Resilience	(2023)

The study titled "Pemanfaatan Lingkungan Sebagai Sumber Pembelajaran Mata Pelajaran IPS" (2017) emphasizes that inadequate human resource quality—particularly among underqualified educators—contributes to monotonous and ineffective teaching practices. Many social studies teachers still fail to implement innovative and diverse instructional strategies. This lack of pedagogical creativity includes the underutilization of the local environment as a contextual learning resource, which significantly undermines student engagement and comprehension.

When geographical, economic, social, and cultural environments are integrated meaningfully into the learning process, students are better able to connect classroom material with real-world social dynamics. As a discipline that seeks to explore and analyze social structures and transformations, social studies has the potential to provide learners with deep insight into issues rooted in their immediate surroundings.

Therefore, incorporating environmental elements as learning resources in social studies transforms learning from theoretical into experiential. Students gain opportunities to explore and reflect on the social implications of ongoing transformations, including emergent digital phenomena such as Cancel Culture. Engaging with real-life social environments encourages students to develop critical thinking skills—particularly in analyzing the causes and consequences of such social trends, evaluating information from diverse perspectives, and formulating thoughtful responses.

In this context, the environment serves not only as a platform for knowledge acquisition but also as a catalyst for nurturing critical awareness of complex, contemporary issues. When students explore such phenomena through socially contextualized learning, they are better equipped to think critically, engage empathetically, and participate meaningfully in an evolving global society.

The subsequent study, "Implementasi Keterampilan Berpikir Kritis pada Pembelajaran IPS pada Jenjang Sekolah Menengah Pertama sebagai Eksistensi Meningkatkan Keterampilan Abad 21" (2019), underscores the need for educators to encourage the use of textbooks and other learning sources as platforms for fostering critical thinking. Teaching students to identify, interpret, and evaluate relevant information is a foundational step in developing their analytical capacities.

This approach is particularly relevant in addressing sociocultural challenges such as Cancel Culture, where students must navigate large volumes of conflicting information. By promoting student-centered and inquiry-based learning, teachers provide learners with

opportunities to engage actively with content, construct meaning, and build their own understanding through critical engagement.

In the context of 21st-century education, critical thinking is recognized as a fundamental skill—essential not only for academic success but also for civic engagement and social responsibility. When applied within the framework of social studies education, these skills enable students to critically examine contemporary social transformations, challenge assumptions, and respond thoughtfully to digital phenomena such as Cancel Culture. Through this process, learners are empowered to become discerning, analytical, and informed participants in a rapidly changing world.

The study titled "Relevansi Pendidikan Ips Dalam Arus Globalisasi" (2019) argues for the sustained significance of social studies in cultivating informed, responsible global citizens. Despite a tendency to undervalue the subject in today's educational climate, social studies remains highly relevant due to its interdisciplinary foundations, which encompass philosophical, ideological, sociological, anthropological, humanitarian, political, psychological, and religious dimensions.

Social studies education is designed not only to provide students with factual knowledge but also to develop rational thinking and logical reasoning skills necessary for solving complex problems in a global context. In this regard, globalization should not be seen as a threat but as an opportunity for educational innovation. It compels educators to adapt to emerging challenges, incorporating global issues and current affairs into the curriculum as dynamic learning resources.

By treating globalization as a pedagogical asset, social studies can serve as a powerful tool for cultivating students' critical awareness of global dynamics. The abundance of accessible information—when critically assessed—can enhance learners' understanding of international affairs, media literacy, and global citizenship. This approach equips students to engage meaningfully with pressing societal issues, including the nuanced implications of Cancel Culture in a hyper-connected, globalized world.

Another study, "Pengaruh Model Pembelajaran Berbasis Masalah Terhadap Kemampuan Berpikir Kritis Dan Prestasi Belajar" (2020), reveals a statistically significant impact of problem-based learning (PBL) on students' critical thinking and academic performance, particularly in civic education at SMA Negeri 1 Pundong.

Quantitative results from post-tests indicate that the critical thinking skill scores yielded a t-value of 3.058 ($p = 0.003$), and academic achievement scores produced a t-value of 3.363 ($p = 0.001$), both exceeding the critical t-value (2.000). These findings affirm that PBL enhances both cognitive and academic outcomes.

Specifically, problem-based learning encourages deeper engagement with learning material, fostering the ability to question assumptions, analyze issues from multiple perspectives, and articulate evidence-based arguments—all of which are key elements of critical thinking. Furthermore, students demonstrated improved academic performance, indicating that critical engagement also reinforces subject mastery.

The integration of PBL in civic and social studies education is especially pertinent in navigating contemporary issues such as Cancel Culture. By positioning students as active problem-solvers, this model empowers them to approach complex societal phenomena with thoughtful analysis and responsible judgment. Ultimately, PBL contributes to the development of reflective, critical, and adaptable learners—qualities essential for thriving in an era of social and digital transformation.

The study titled "Menumbuhkan Berpikir Kritis Pada Siswa Melalui Peran Guru Dan Peran Sekolah" (2021) defines critical thinking as the cognitive ability to evaluate or resolve problems. Critical thinking skills are essential for students to make informed decisions and become proficient problem-solvers. Teachers can foster critical thinking through learning activities and the provision of Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) tasks. Learning activities encourage students to identify and solve problems, while HOTS tasks train them to engage in

higher-level reasoning. Schools support this development via extracurricular programs, school literacy initiatives, and student councils. These experiences help students develop mind-sets to independently assess and process incoming information. The synergy between teacher and school roles in nurturing critical thinking is highly relevant in social studies, serving as a tool for understanding social change. Trained critical thinkers can more deeply, critically, and contextually evaluate social phenomena like Cancel Culture.

The study “Inovasi Guru Dalam Pembelajaran Abad 21 Berbasis Teknologi Informasi” (2022) highlights that teachers must master various domains, be pedagogically adept—including innovative teaching methods—align with curriculum policy and educational issues, design effective lessons, leverage new media/technology, and uphold values shaping students’ character. Innovative practices include developing media or instructional methods aligned with current social changes. Teachers are expected to have broad, interdisciplinary understanding to enrich pedagogy. They must design engaging and effective instruction, continually update knowledge about curriculum and policy shifts, and integrate digital technology into lessons to enhance relevance. Teachers also play a role in shaping moral and character development through values-based instruction. Using technology-based learning media that correspond to social contexts—such as the dynamics underpinning Cancel Culture—empowers social studies teachers to facilitate critical thinking and guide students in understanding social transformation.

This research “Integrasi Isu-Isu Sosial Kekinian dalam Pembelajaran IPS: Sebuah Analisis Relevansi” (2022) observes that students often passively engage—e.g., note-taking or responding to teacher questions—in social studies classes. To make learning more engaging and challenging, teachers should begin with current and contextual social issues, such as the Russia–Ukraine war or global inequities including the COVID-19 pandemic. Contextual and relevant social studies can enhance social awareness, not just cognitive skills, but also attitudes and competencies. Through an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates global education, moral education, legal and multicultural education, career and environmental education, values education, community involvement, sociology, psychology, and economics, students can evolve into responsible national and global citizens. They can be agents of peace from an early age. Social studies offers a bridge to understanding social change, including phenomena like Cancel Culture, enabling students to develop critical thinking, empathy, and social responsibility in a changing global landscape.

Linear regression analyses of “Pengaruh Kemampuan Komunikasi Interpersonal Dan Kemampuan Berpikir Kritis Terhadap Hasil Belajar Pada Mata Pelajaran IPS” (2023) indicate that both interpersonal communication (X1) and critical thinking (X2) significantly influence learning outcomes (Y) in social studies at SMPN 45 Surabaya. Interpersonal communication showed significance value $\text{Sig} = 0.000 < 0.05$, $t\text{-value} = 4.347 > t\text{-table} = 1.987$. Similarly, critical thinking had $\text{Sig} = 0.000 < 0.05$, $t\text{-value} = 5.898 > 1.987$. Multiple regression analysis confirmed that together, these skills significantly affect learning outcomes ($F = 19.283 > F_{\text{table}} = 3.10$; $\text{Sig} = 0.000 < 0.05$). These findings demonstrate that interpersonal communication and critical thinking—both individually and jointly—are crucial for student success in social studies. Strong communication enables students to interact and grasp social dynamics, while critical thinking empowers deeper evaluation and reasoned responses to social phenomena like Cancel Culture.

Another study, “Peran Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial Dalam Membantu Siswa Memahami Dinamika Sosial Masyarakat Kontemporer” (2023) defines social studies education, as part of a program aiming to form responsible citizens, equips students with knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for contemporary communal life. It fosters understanding of social, political, cultural, and economic aspects in modern society. This includes preparing students to navigate fundamental trends such as globalization, individualization, and digitization. Social studies helps students understand geography, population distribution, culture, historical events, law, language, governance, human behavior, mental processes, and social conduct. Such knowledge enables

students to adapt and thrive in a changing society—becoming informed, responsible citizens capable of positive social contribution.

This study “Embracing Digital Literacy through School Resilience” (2023) emphasizes creative approaches to integrating digital literacy with social studies in the digital era. Social literacy and social studies literacy prepare citizens for increasingly digital societies. Integrating the digital world into social studies enriches technological understanding and promotes digital literacy. Students learn not only how to use technology but also understand its social, cultural, political, and economic implications. Embedding digital literacy into the social studies curriculum enables students to explore digitalization’s societal impact. Creative instructional design—such as technology-rich lessons with real-world relevance—fosters interest and develops skills in both domains. In social studies, such integration enriches technological comprehension and cultivates critical thinking about social transformations, including phenomena like Cancel Culture.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the literature review presented above address the core research questions by highlighting the role of social studies education in fostering students' critical thinking skills and their understanding of social change, particularly in relation to the phenomenon of Cancel Culture.

(1) Across various studies, it is evident that integrating social studies learning with the local environment, employing innovative teaching strategies, and promoting critical thinking allow students to engage in deeper evaluations of the information they receive. Enhanced critical thinking skills enable students to assess complex social phenomena such as Cancel Culture with greater wisdom, reflection, and analytical depth.

(2) Social studies education also facilitates students' comprehension of ongoing social transformations within their immediate surroundings. In this context, social studies teachers play a pivotal role by initiating learning through contextual and current social issues—such as the effects of globalization, individualization, and digitalization. Through this approach, students are better equipped to understand and respond thoughtfully to contemporary social phenomena, including Cancel Culture.

The integration of critical thinking with a broad understanding of social change, nurtured through social studies education, helps students become responsible and insightful agents of change in an ever-evolving society. Moreover, embedding information technology, creative pedagogical strategies, and interdisciplinary approaches within the social studies curriculum equips students with relevant skills for navigating today’s dynamic social realities—including their responses to phenomena like Cancel Culture.

The significance of social studies education lies in its emphasis on developing critical thinking skills. The literature underscores that integrating social studies with students’ lived environments, employing innovative methods, and cultivating reflective inquiry can substantially enhance students’ ability to evaluate information critically. Social studies teachers are key actors in this development process. By deliberately selecting socially relevant and timely topics—such as Cancel Culture—they can guide students to explore the implications of globalization and digital society more effectively.

Critical thinking skills developed through social studies learning empower students to critically analyze and reflect on social phenomena. Students can cultivate the ability to recognize and assess the broader social implications of movements like Cancel Culture from a nuanced and informed perspective. This combination of critical thinking and social awareness fosters students' capacity to contribute meaningfully to society as responsible, thoughtful, and engaged citizens.

Furthermore, the integration of digital technology in social studies learning enhances student engagement and provides greater access to current information. Online platforms, digital resources, and technology-based learning tools can support students in acquiring relevant skills to navigate social change. Teachers can adopt creative learning strategies to motivate students and nurture their critical thinking abilities. The use of case studies, simulations, and research-based projects can stimulate critical reflection and the application of social studies concepts to real-life

contexts. By consistently linking learning content to contemporary and contextual social issues—such as Cancel Culture—educators can help students connect theoretical frameworks with practical realities, enabling more effective and meaningful responses to social transformation..

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