

Zoe Thomas weighs in on cancel culture.

- 1 So what exactly does it mean to be cancelled? According to Kimberly Foster, founder of the website 'For Harriet', who has written about cancel culture, the term is used to apply to a range of actions – cancel culture can include everything from people with the most money and privilege in our society getting pushed back for saying things others found distasteful to regular everyday people losing their jobs for relatively minor infractions. When it was first used among young people on the internet, cancelling was a way to say, "I'm done with you". But as cancelling became more widely used on social media it has grown into a way to call on others to reject a person or business. This can happen when the target breaks social norms – for example, making sexist comments – but it has also happened when people have expressed opinions on politics, business and even pop culture. 5 10
- 2 In 2019, former US President Barack Obama weighed into the debate about cancel culture, saying it was "not activism". He told an audience at an event that if all they were doing was casting stones, then they would probably not get that far. He added that he got the sense some young people felt being as "judgmental as possible" was the best way to force change and cautioned them that the world was "messy" and full of "ambiguities". A similar argument was made by a group of over 100 writers and academics including J.K. Rowling and Noam Chomsky, in a letter published in Harper's magazine. They argued that cancel culture had created an "intolerant climate" and had weakened "norms of open debate". The letter received criticism by those who said the writers were already in positions of power and that cancel culture was meant to give a voice to those with less privilege. 15 20
- 3 Cancellers say using social media to call attention to actions they do not agree with, is the only way to create consequences for those who have more power in society. That power can come in the form of money or influence. Other times, cancellers say that power comes from their race or gender. At the heart of many complaints about cancel culture is the idea that there are few ways to make amends once cancel culture says you have done something wrong. When an ordinary individual is the target, those options for apologies or fixing an issue are even fewer. That can mean the financial consequences are more severe. It is important to remember that someone is paying the price. When brands are targeted by cancel culture, they can often find ways to move past an incident, while individuals can be left with very expensive consequences. 25 30
- 4 On 27 June, a video of a man shouting at an elderly woman at a Costco in Florida was shared on social media, along with a call to identify him. The video went viral and by the following day, the man had been identified from a picture on his company's website. Hours after he was identified, with a growing number of posts expressing outrage at his action, he was fired. In a statement, the company thanked those commenting on the internet for raising awareness about the behaviour of its 'former employee'. It said that his behaviour in the video was in direct conflict with the company's values. 35 40
- 5 When ordinary individuals are cancelled, they could simply step off social media to wait out the public criticism. But by calling on an employer to act, cancellers are able to follow their targets offline as well. For companies deciding whether to fire an employee who has been cancelled is tricky. In the US, many employment contracts give businesses a large amount of discretion over when to terminate a worker's contract. Letting go of an employee who has committed an offence may be the fastest way for a firm to quickly restore its reputation. But for the employee who was fired, moving is not as easy and finding new work can be difficult. Potential employers are likely to be thinking about the costs of hiring a person with a reputation for being cancelled. At the end of the day, it is a business decision and the company has to consider if it can deal with the possible blowback. 45

- 6 Businesses are also not immune from the financial consequences of cancel culture. According to Kimberly Foster, social media has given everyday people a way to speak to corporations and institutions that in the past would have been difficult if not impossible for them to reach. By voicing their opinions on products or actions by executives and company advertising, consumers have been able to force change. Recently, pancake brand Aunt Jemima was cancelled for perpetuating racist stereotypes. In response, Quaker Oats, the owner of the brand, announced it would "retire" the name. That result sparked cancellers to double their efforts to get another food brand, Uncle Ben, to change its name for the same reason. It worked and the brand's parent company, Mars, said it would change it to Ben's. 50 55
- 7 But when cancel culture targets a firm, there is not just criticism the business must deal with, there is also the threat consumers will stop buying their products. Cancel culture can be seen as the modern day version of a boycott. It is not always an offence by the brand that causes a company to be targeted. Over the summer, as cancel culture's impact was swelling, Goya Foods, the largest Hispanic-owned food brand, found itself as the target. The cancelling came after the company's chief executive, Robert Unanue, attended an event at the White House where he praised President Donald Trump. 60
- 8 Cancellers claimed that praising President Trump, whose policies they said were harmful to the Latino community in the US, showed that Goya and its executives did not support the same values as its customers. The cancel culture pile-on was swift. Pictures of people throwing away Goya products and buying other brands circulated, along with the hashtags #Goyaway and #BoycottGoya trending within hours of the event. Politicians including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, celebrities such as Lin-Manuel Miranda all took to social media to say they would no longer be buying Goya products. This shows that there is not just a desire but "real expectation" that brands live up to their customers' values. People are making buying decisions with these things in mind. 65 70
- 9 Notably for Goya, the target of cancellation was not the chief executive, it was the company itself. Targeting the company rather than the individual can be more likely to produce long-term change. The internet has empowered marginalised groups to speak up about offences. But cancel culture needs to find ways to let their targets make amends. The irony of cancel culture is that while it is enticing to engage in, it flies in the face of everything our generation are trying to achieve; it lacks nuance, patience, understanding and communication. It is rooted in humiliating the offending party and in a privileged view that, 'I know better than you.' 75
- 10 If we are going to invest in letting people know when they have stepped out of the bounds of what society finds tasteful or appropriate, then we also need to be sure we have ways of letting people know how they can repair the harm they have done. For businesses, that may be changing a brand name or firing an employee to demonstrate that the company's values match those of its customers; but for individuals who are cancelled, the costs are likely to be more long-term. 80