

B1 TEENS

Cancel Culture: Fair or Unfair?

Online accountability and the third conditional

B1 Intermediate | Grammar | Reading | 40 min

★ Lesson Objectives

- ✓ Read about cancel culture -- what it is, why it happens, whether it's fair
- ✓ Learn vocabulary for online behaviour, accountability and public opinion
- ✓ Use the third conditional (if + past perfect, would have + pp)
- ✓ Express regret and imagine alternative past outcomes
- ✓ Discuss online accountability, forgiveness and public shaming
- ✓ Write about hypothetical past situations and consequences

1 Before You Read

- ▶ Have you ever seen someone get 'cancelled' online?
- ▶ Should people be punished for things they said years ago?
- ▶ Is there a difference between holding someone accountable and bullying them?

2 Reading: The Court of Public Opinion

Words in this colour are key vocabulary -- definitions are in Section 3.

The Court of Public Opinion

In 2019, a university student named Alex posted a joke on social media. It was a joke about a sensitive topic -- the kind that some would find funny and others deeply **offensive**. Within hours, the post had gone **viral**. Thousands of strangers saw it, shared it, and commented on it. Many were angry. Some started a **petition** demanding Alex be expelled. Others contacted Alex's employer. By the end of the week, Alex had lost their part-time job, had been publicly **shamed**, and was receiving death threats. Alex later said: "If I had known one joke would destroy my life, I would never have posted it."

Alex's story is not unique. **Cancel culture** -- the practice of publicly **rejecting** or **boycotting** someone because of something they said or did -- has become one of the most **controversial** topics of our time. Supporters say it holds powerful people **accountable**. Critics say it's a form of online **mob** justice that destroys lives without fair process.

Social media researcher Dr. Priya Mehta says cancel culture has both sides. "On one hand, it gives ordinary people power to challenge **injustice**. Before social media, if a **public figure** said something racist, there was little ordinary people could do. Now a single tweet can start a movement. If social media hadn't existed, many cases of **discrimination** and abuse would never have been exposed."

"On the other hand," Dr. Mehta continues, "cancel culture often goes too far. It doesn't **distinguish** between a genuine **crime** and a bad joke. It doesn't allow people to **apologise**, learn and grow. And it often targets ordinary people who don't have the resources to defend themselves. If people had been more careful about separating serious **offences** from minor mistakes, cancel culture would have been much more effective."

The permanence of the internet is a major problem. A tweet posted at fifteen can resurface at twenty-five. Sixteen-year-old Marta from Portugal knows this well. "My friend shared an old photo of me wearing a costume people found offensive. I had worn it when I was eleven. But people online didn't care about the **context**. If they had looked at the full picture, they would have seen I was just a child. Instead, I received hundreds of hateful messages in one night."

Cultural commentator James Okafor **argues** that the real issue is how we hold people accountable. "There's a difference between **accountability** and **punishment**. Accountability means: 'What you did was wrong. Please do better.' Punishment means: 'You deserve to suffer.' Cancel culture too often chooses punishment over **education**. If we had focused on teaching people instead of destroying them, we would have created a better culture."

Dr. Mehta offers three rules: check the **context**, give people the chance to apologise before **condemning** them, and ask yourself: if you had made the same mistake, would you want to be treated this way? "The internet never forgets," she says. "But humans should be allowed to."

3 Vocabulary

Word	Definition	Example
cancel culture	publicly rejecting someone for offensive actions	"Cancel culture is controversial."
accountable	responsible and expected to explain	"Hold people accountable."
offensive	causing hurt or anger	"The joke was deeply offensive."

Word	Definition	Example
viral	spreading quickly online	"The post went viral."
boycott	refuse to support as protest	"Fans boycotted the brand."
shame (v)	publicly embarrass someone	"He was publicly shamed."
petition	formal request signed by many	"Started a petition."
mob	angry crowd without leadership	"A form of mob justice."
injustice	unfair treatment of people	"Challenge injustice."
discrimination	unfair treatment based on identity	"Discrimination was exposed."
context	situation that helps explain something	"Taken out of context."
apologise	say sorry for wrongdoing	"Give people chance to apologise."
condemn	express strong disapproval	"Don't condemn before checking facts."
accountability	being responsible for actions	"Accountability vs punishment."
public figure	famous person known to public	"Public figures face scrutiny."
consequence	result or effect of an action	"Every action has consequences."

Collocations: cancel culture • hold accountable • go viral • public shaming • out of context • mob justice • freedom of speech • face consequences

4 Grammar: Third Conditional

Imagining different past: "If I had known, I would never have posted it."

Different outcome: "If they had given me a chance, they would have understood."

Different world: "If social media hadn't existed, many cases would never have been exposed."

Part	Form	Example
If-clause	If + had (not) + pp	If she had studied harder...
Result	would (not) have + pp	...she would have passed.
Negative if	If + hadn't + pp	If he hadn't posted it...
Negative result	wouldn't have + pp	...this wouldn't have happened.

⚠ Common Mistakes

~~If I would have known, I wouldn't have gone.~~ → **If I had known...** (no would in if-clause)

~~She would passed the exam.~~ → **She would have passed.** (would HAVE + pp)

~~If I had knew the answer.~~ → **If I had known...** (past participle, not past simple)

5 Match the Halves

#	If-clause (Past Perfect)	Result (would have + pp)
1	If he had thought before posting,	he wouldn't have lost his job.
2	If they had checked the context,	they would have understood.
3	If she hadn't shared the photo,	nobody would have seen it.
4	If social media hadn't existed,	it wouldn't have gone viral.
5	If he had apologised immediately,	people would have forgiven him.
6	If I had known it was offensive,	I would never have said it.
7	If they had given her a chance,	she would have explained.
8	If we had focused on education,	we'd have built a better culture.
9	If the internet weren't permanent,	old posts wouldn't have resurfaced.
10	If people had been less angry,	they would have listened to both sides.

6 Comprehension Quiz

1. What happened to Alex?

Answer: Lost job, was shamed, received threats

2. Positive side of cancel culture (Dr. Mehta)?

Answer: Gives people power to challenge injustice

3. What happened to Marta?

Answer: Old childhood photo shared, attacked online

4. Okafor: accountability vs punishment?

Answer: Accountability teaches, punishment destroys

5. 'If I had known, I would never have posted.' Means...

Answer: I didn't know, and I regret posting

6. Third conditional talks about...

Answer: An unreal situation in the past

7. 'If she ___ harder, she would have passed.'

Answer: had studied

8. Which is WRONG?

Answer: If I would have known, I would have helped.

7 Fill in the Blanks

Word Bank: had known • would have posted • had checked • would have understood • hadn't existed • would have been • had apologised • would have forgiven

1. If I _____ it was offensive, I never _____ it.
2. If they _____ the context, they _____.
3. If social media _____, the scandal never _____ so big.
4. If he _____ immediately, people _____ him.

Answers: 1. had known, would have posted • 2. had checked, would have understood • 3. hadn't existed, would have been • 4. had apologised, would have forgiven

8 Speaking & Writing

◆ Discussion Questions

- Is cancel culture a good thing, bad thing, or both?
- Should people be judged for things they said years ago?
- Accountability vs cyberbullying -- where is the line?
- Have you ever regretted posting something online?
- 'The internet never forgets, but humans should.' Agree?

◆ Example Dialogue

A: Do you think cancel culture is fair?

B: Sometimes. If someone does something truly harmful, they should face consequences.

A: But what about Alex? If he had known, he would never have posted it.

B: True. If people had given him a chance to apologise, things would have been different.

A: If we focused on education instead of punishment, we'd build a better society.

B: The problem is online mobs don't think about context.

 **Writing Task**

Write 100-150 words. Use at least 4 third conditional sentences:

Option A: Analyse a cancel culture case. What would have happened differently?

Option B: Write about a past mistake. What would you have done differently?

9 What Would Have Happened? – The Game

Interactive game available online. Complete 10 third conditional sentences!

#	Sentence	Answer
1	If he ___ before posting... (think)	had thought
2	If she hadn't shared it, nobody ___ it.	would have seen
3	If social media ___... (not exist)	hadn't existed
4	If they ___ the context... (check)	had checked
5	...if they ___ her a chance. (give)	had given
6	If I ___ it was offensive... (know)	had known
7	People ___ him if he'd apologised.	would have forgiven
8	If we ___ on education... (focus)	had focused
9	The scandal ___ so big without internet.	wouldn't have been
10	If you ___ the same mistake... (make)	had made

10 Review Checklist

- ✓ I can understand a text about cancel culture and online accountability
- ✓ I can use vocabulary for online behaviour and public opinion
- ✓ I can form the third conditional (if + past perfect, would have + pp)
- ✓ I can express regret and imagine alternative past outcomes
- ✓ I can discuss accountability, forgiveness and online behaviour
- ✓ I can write about hypothetical past situations

Congratulations!

You have completed this lesson: Cancel Culture: Fair or Unfair?