

Bachelor Thesis in Retail Management

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Influencers, a company's blessing or curse?

An experimental study on how influencer type impacts brand perception after a scandal

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Abstract

As influencer generated content leads to increased brand attitude and purchase intention, compared to traditional media, the use of influencers has become the norm in many companies' marketing strategy. However, what happens when the influencer gets in trouble? Companies' brand perception risks being indirectly affected by the scandals of associated influencers. This paper investigates if the type of influencer, makeup or cooking, has an impact on consumer's brand perception of an associated brand in response to a scandal involving the affiliated influencer. The research was performed using an experimental approach, and analyzed quantitatively through a survey, gauging respondents' attitudes by various questions after being exposed to one of two fictional scenarios. The study adds to current research within influencer marketing by finding support that type of influencer does indeed have an impact on how severe the brand's repercussions are in response to the associated influencer's controversy. Both in terms of brand attitude and purchase intention in response to the scandal. Managerial implications are presented to bring value to practitioners. And ultimately, based on the results, the authors suggest further research to investigate the underlying mechanics of the findings and possible extensions, building on the same theme.

Key words: influencer marketing, social media, retail, brand perception, endorsement, influencer types

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1. Introduction

Influencers are taking over. The market value for the global influencer marketing industry was estimated to be USD 16.4 bn in 2022. Considering it was valued at USD 1.7 bn in 2016, the market has experienced a 46% compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) in the previous six years (HypeAuditor, 2022), and is expected to keep growing with more than double digits growth through 2025 (InfluencerMarketingHub, 2023). With this new central role of influencers, academia is catching up to fill knowledge gaps. A good amount of research has been conducted on positive aspects of influencer marketing (e.g., Ki et al., 2020), thus largely overlooking its potential adverse effects. One such unexplored area is when a company brand's associated influencer is involved in a scandal unrelated to the company, and how much of that is reflected back on the brand. Moreover, scandalous news sells, and is therefore pushed by the media to generate interest and, subsequently, revenue (Dean, 2004). The effect is thereby amplified by the widespread reach of both traditional, but also, fast-moving social media coverage. Although, the severity of the scandal is not a determining factor whether media outlets share a story or not (Newmark & Vaughan, 2014), leading to influencers being more exposed to the risk of negative media coverage even due to less significant events.

But what happens to brands associated with influencers that are involved in such scandals? Are there different reactions depending on the type of influencer? This question set the foundation for a research question, aimed to be answered by this study. To draw conclusions on the matter, an experiment was undertaken where two fictional scenarios, depicting an influencer spitting at a homeless person, were created with a slight difference. In one of the scenarios the person in question was a makeup influencer, and in the other, it was a cooking influencer. The types of influencers were chosen due to their prevalence within influencer marketing with Swedish examples such as Bianca Ingrosso, Therese Lindgren, Markus Aujalay, and Tommy Myllmäki. But also by their different characteristics such as skillset tangibility, perceived depth of the field and associated stereotypes.

The subject fits well in today's setting as these scandals are common, with recent examples being, Margaux Dietz filming a homeless person (Expressen, 2022), causing the endorsing brand *Stronger* to end the collaboration, and Kanye West expressing anti semitic remarks resulting the end of a long-term collaboration with *Adidas* (Aftonbladet, 2022), which further

resulted in *Adidas* having to dispose of merchandise worth USD 1.3 bn (Fortune, 2023). Consequently, these actions by the influencers, entail serious consequences, both directly for the influencer, but also indirectly for brands associated with the influencer.

1.1 Purpose & Research Question

The purpose of this report is to expand the knowledge within the field of influencer marketing by aiming to answer the following research question:

- *When an influencer is involved in a scandal, does the influencer type, makeup or cooking, impact consumers' perception of a company brand associated with the influencer?*

This will contribute to research within influencer marketing, more specifically to the field exploring the dynamic relationship between a company and an influencer. This research holds significant importance for companies using influencers in their marketing strategy, to inform about potential risk pertaining to usage of different influencer types.

1.2 Definitions

- **Brand:** *"a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them which is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors"* (Kotler 1997; Keller, K. L, 2008).

Important to note that the word “brand” is used extensively throughout the essay and exclusively refers to the associated company brand and not the brand of an influencer.

- **Concreteness:** *The tempting aspects of communicating with real emotions displayed by faces behind typically faceless corporations* (Malone & Fiske, 2013)

- **Credibility:** *The believability of an entity's intentions at a particular point in time and is posited to have two main aspects: expertise and trustworthiness (Erdem & Swait, 2004).*

 - **Influencer marketing:** *Marketing conducted using influencers on social media platforms (InfluencerMarketingHub, 2023)*

 - **Para-social interaction:** *Parasocial interaction (PSI) is the interaction between a media character and the media user. This kind of interaction is called parasocial, because on the one hand the interaction is social since the mass media users act in way typical for normal social relationships, although on the other hand it is only para-social because it is not reciprocal – since the media figure does not really participate in the interaction and his or her behavior is not (directly) related to the user (Colliander and Dahlén, 2011).*

 - **Scandal:** *An action, or a series of unethical actions, that creates indignation (Sims, 2009).*

 - **Social Media Influencer:** *Social media influencers are defined as individuals online who influence the people following the person in question on social media platforms (Rundin and Colliander, 2021).*
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2. Theory

This section presents previous research relevant to answer the outlined research question. The theory sets the ground for the hypotheses that the study builds upon.

2.1 Influencer Marketing

2.1.1 Brand Image

In order to ensure long term prosperity and the success of a company, it is crucial to work on the company's brand image. This can be done in various ways, but Kotler (1997) created a framework highlighting the three most important aspects to focus on to make a brand image effective: 1. *Have a clear message* 2. *Have a unique message compared to competitors* 3. *The message should evoke emotions and mental associations in the minds of consumers*. The framework is old but still relevant today. One of the tools most frequently and extensively used by companies nowadays to differentiate themselves from competitors, and to help spread their "message", is by using influencers and other endorsing celebrities in their marketing communications (Tanwar et al., 2022). Influencer marketing has a multitude of benefits such as helping spread brand awareness and enabling the company to better break through noise surrounding prospective customers, thus making its marketing more effective (Um & Lee, 2015). It can also help improve brand credibility by taking advantage of the reputation of the associated influencer and help make the brand message more tangible for customers (Goldsmith et al, 2000). This can be achieved through mechanisms such as parasocial interaction which facilitates relationship building between for example an influencer and a follower (Colliander and Dahlén, 2011).

2.1.2 Brand Credibility

Goldsmith et al. (2000) posits that celebrities are generally seen by consumers as credible sources of information for the product or firm they endorse, which Singh & Banerjee (2021) argue holds for influencers in the modern media landscape. Goldsmith et al. (2000) further state that information from a credible source can have a significant impact on their convictions, behavior, and demeanor through internalization. In internalization, consumers

effectively embrace a social performer's conviction as their own, so company brands can utilize celebrities to influence consumers (Kelman, 1961).

Furthermore, when an influencer is perceived as credible by their followers it leads to more positive brand attitudes and higher acceptance of product claims (Sing & Banerjee, (2021). Influencers can attract attention to a brand, resulting in increased brand awareness and publicity. By associating themselves with credible influencers, companies can gain credibility for their brands (Um & Lee, 2015). Credibility is in turn an essential characteristic of a brand, representing its positioning and the trustworthiness of its promises (Erdem & Swait, 2004). Brands can establish credibility through authentic and trustworthy knowledge conveyed through marketing activities, including the use of credible celebrities (Singh & Banerjee, 2021). Celebrities contribute to brand recognition, recall, and favorable attitudes (Tripp et al., 1994). Moreover, they also provide cultural meanings to products or brands, helping consumers achieve an aspirational image in line with the celebrity's brand persona (McCracken 1986). The combination of celebrity and brand credibility builds trust, leading to stronger commitment and customer loyalty (Singh & Banerjee, 2021).

2.1.3 “Humanization” of Brands

In most brand interactions, there is a lack of concreteness, leading consumers to engage with brands in a more abstract manner that may result in general purchase behavior but fails to cultivate true customer loyalty. In these instances, celebrities can serve as a type of emotional reassurance, embodying the trustworthiness of the brand. The public tends to evaluate brands as if they were actual human beings, basing judgments on the characteristics of the people associated with the brands (Malone & Fiske, 2013). With the rise of e-commerce, consumers have become more cautious and less loyal to companies and brands whose leaders remain hidden behind logos (Anderson et al., 2002). Consequently, due to the changing market landscape, with increased intangibility, there is a growing need for human representation to embody brands and help make them more tangible for customers, which can be achieved by using an influencer.

2.1.4 The Parasocial Relationship

Colliander and Dahlén (2011), concludes that blogs can be described as "fashionable friends", displaying superior publicity effectiveness because of mediators such as para-social interaction (PSI). This effectiveness creates strong and influential relationships between influencers and their followers, similar to word-of-mouth relationships. Influencers can be seen as modern-day bloggers considering their similar function and similar relationship with their followers as the blogger and his/her readers. Considering the vital role of word-of-mouth when it comes to influencing purchasing decisions, these connections hold immense power and influence. As friendships grow, they foster both credibility and trust. Nevertheless, it is vital for influencers to be perceived as trustworthy and impartial, due to the delicate nature of these types of relationships (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011).

2.2 Scandals & Their Impact

Negative publicity (NP) has emerged as a significant determinant of consumers' purchasing decisions in recent times. This has been highlighted in a well-known study done by DDB Needham Worldwide, in this study negative publicity was identified as a crucial factor influencing consumer behavior (Ahluwalia et al., 2000). The significance of NP on consumer decision-making is not surprising. Considering generally, publicity carries more credibility than traditional advertising, which in turn makes it a more influential source of information for consumers (Ahluwalia et al., 2000). Thus, the power of shaping a brand's reputation lies not solely with the brand management team, but also with the public media and consumers (Chaudhuri, 2002; Chang et al., 2005).

Consequently, NP and reputation management have a significant effect on a brand's reputation, which in turn is influenced by consumers, the media, and competitors (Chaudhuri, 2002; Chang et al., 2005). NP and word-of-mouth can have an impact on brand perceptions and company performance. Similar brands tend to suffer during a company crisis, while diverse brands who differ from the brand involved in the crisis may actually gain from it. Thus, positioning the brand across different item categories reduces the risk of crisis contagion within its own category and may potentially bring the company some competitive advantages within the category if a competitor is involved in a crisis (Lange & Dahlén, 2006).

Notwithstanding, a brand crisis has an impact on the entire product category and increases the perceived risk for all brands in the category. In the same manner, disputes concerning the quality of the product can influence consumers' view of brand equity. Good brand perceptions have a positive effect on business performance, whereas bad ones can affect credibility and attitudes, which may cause customers to switch loyalty to competitors (Lange & Dahlén 2006).

Furthermore, well-established brands with strong track records are better equipped to overcome the negative consequences of brand controversies. However, no business is immune to controversy, and regardless of the pre-controversy reputation, consumer confidence tends to decline. Companies should respond quickly to controversies, expressing both their regrets and disclosing internal processes in order to win back the trust of its customers and uphold long-term customer loyalty (Banerjee, 2018).

Considering media's central role in shaping brand perceptions, and the media's preference for negative news, companies should proceed with caution when deciding its use of influencer marketing due to aforementioned dynamics of influencer marketing which ties the influencer and the brand together and creates associations between them. Although, the use of influencers could also help the company distance itself and its brand image from competitors which can help it mitigate negative brand fallout from a competitor in the same category being involved in a scandal.

2.3 The Categorization of Influencers

Due to the rising prevalence of influencer marketing in today's corporate marketing strategies, the range of influencer types is becoming more and more extensive (Vrontis et al., 2020). Effectively increasing consumers' interest in a promoted product is crucial due to the substantial expenses involved in product advertising. Therefore, choosing appropriate influencers for respective campaigns is imperative (Silvera & Austad, 2004). However, there are many ways of categorizing influencers.

2.3.1 A Typology for Influencer Types

According to Gross & Wangenheim (2018) influencers can be divided into four categories, based on two variables. The first variable, *domain breadth*, differentiates between a narrow and a broad domain, where a narrow-focused influencer possesses more domain knowledge and reap benefits such as higher credibility and trustworthiness. For an efficient exchange, domain knowledge requires both the influencer and the audience to attain background information. On the other hand, a broad domain speaks to a larger crowd, expanding the influencer's reach and thereby exhibiting another type of value. Depending on the campaign run by a company, the influencer type can be chosen to fit the purpose of the campaign to, for example, either focus on conversion through a credible influencer, or brand awareness through an influencer with broader reach (Gross & Wangenheim, 2018). An example of an influencer with a broad domain is Bianca Ingrosso, with presence in several domains such as makeup, apparel and jewelry (Elle, 2023). On the contrary, Margareta Gräås is strictly a makeup influencer, focused on informative content grounded in her makeup artist education (Barometern OT, 2022).

The second variable in Gross & Wangenheim's study (2018), *social presence*, describes the influencer's presence within their audience. Different social media platforms exhibit varying levels of social presence (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), and so do the influencers themselves. Influencers who possess a strong social presence create a close and accessible connection with their audience. A higher social presence leads to more influential conversations, which increases the convincing power of the influencer's message (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Furthermore, the promptness of response, frequency of communication, and the extent of information shared, hold significant importance in assessing the value of information in online discussions (Weiss et al., 2008). If establishing intimacy and approachability are primary objectives of an influencer campaign, companies should consider partnering with influencers who possess a strong social presence.

This emphasizes the importance of choosing an appropriate influencer to a specific campaign, rather than before embarking on the journey with whichever influencer comes to mind. Initially identifying a target audience and a goal with a marketing campaign, allows for the appropriate level of domain breadth and social presence to be established. By these two

variables, Gross and Wangeheim (2018). propose a 2x2 model with four distinct influencer types that can be used to match a marketing campaign with a suitable influencer. Snoopers and informers are both high social presence, but informers are narrower in their domain breadth, focusing on informative and educational content compared to snoopers' personal insights focus. Entertainers and infotainers are similar in their low social presences, but different in the domain breadth where entertainers have a wider focus. Infotainers are hybrids of informers and entertainers, entertaining their audience with informative and educational content within their focal domain, whereas the entertainer's motivation consists simply of giving people a good time. Due to the unexplored and rapid-paced area of influencer marketing, the typology is not fully comprehensive and further research is encouraged, in a pursuit of further assisting practitioners in their marketing efforts and filling research gaps in the field at the same time (Gross & Wangenheim, 2018).

2.3.2 Different Sized Influencers

An influencer can also be categorized depending on its reach, referring to measures such as number of followers, or amount of follower interactions for example (Kay et al., 2020). Different campaigns entail different risk levels (Park et al., 2021), the usage of influencers can therefore also be tailored with respect to the size of the influencer depending on the risk level of the campaign. Park et al. (2021) found that micro-influencers are superior to mega-influencers in terms of advertising effectiveness. Though, this effectiveness differs depending on the type of product being endorsed, with micro-influencers being particularly influential for hedonic products (Park et al., 2021). Furthermore, depending on the reach of an influencer, the amount of awareness and electronic word-of-mouth generated by the campaign can be of substantial importance, significantly impacting company performance (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). The performance of a marketing campaign is also moderated by the consumer's perception of the influencer's liking of the product, and the overall attitude towards the influencer. Moreover, the influencer's perceived knowledge within the relevant product domain also has a moderating effect on inferences made by the consumer, highlighting the importance of choosing influencer type delicately (Silvera & Austad, 2004).

2.3.3 Stereotypes

Considering the fast-paced emergence of influencer marketing, the areas in which influencers are operating continue to expand. Another relevant way of categorizing influencers is therefore by their specific domain. As these domains have been around long before the term influencer marketing came to be, influencers active in a domain inherit stereotypes pertaining to the same domain. Stereotyping is a way of easing the need for cognition and thereby a common tool for the human brain, which has a great efficiency focus (Macrae et al., 1994). As both occupational stereotypes and service industry stereotypes impact consumers' judgment (Imhoff et al., 2018; Batra et al., 2010; Loken, 2006), in extension, commercial implications to an influencer marketing campaign can be derived from stereotypes related to the type of influencer being presented. Women advertised in a male-stereotyped job role exhibit higher positive brand attitude than in a women-stereotyped job role (Liljedal et al., 2020), further proving the power of stereotypes in marketing. Despite the effect not following the direction of the stereotype, meaning giving negative effect if the stereotype is fulfilled, this signals the importance for companies to reflect on potential stereotypes before determining the intended depiction of a campaign. Further, perceived product quality is positively affected by non-stereotyped depictions of women in advertising (Liljedal et al., 2020). Being a strong driver of purchase intention (Rodoula, 2006), the positive perceived quality relation suggests that purchase intention is also driven by the non-stereotypical portrayal. However, there are also indications that these stereotypes are mitigated due to the power of influencer marketing (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). This calls for further research to study the field more thoroughly and get a better understanding of how influencer type impacts associated brands.

2.3.4 Expectations From Different Influencer Types

Relevant to this study are two different types of influencers, makeup and cooking. Food, being closely related to culture and authenticity (Abarca, 2004; Hamzah et al., 2016), can be seen as possessing more substance than makeup. The presentation has its significance, but the main focus in food is the process of cooking, the ingredients and, of course, the taste. Mainly used to either camouflage or seduce, the makeup industry on the other hand, revolves around appearance and can therefore be interpreted as a shallower domain (Korichi et al., 2007).

Cooking can also be seen as a more tangible skill set, making it easier to understand due to the intrinsic need of humans to attain food, and thereby dismiss makeup influencer's credibility due to being "less" skillful. Makeup on the other hand is often promoting idealistic looks for the audience to mimic. This has put a lot of strains on younger generations due to the ubiquitous presence of social media and advertising with people wearing flawless makeup. Another possible divider between a cooking influencer and a makeup influencer is that makeup influencers are predominantly female, making it a subject of gender stereotypes as well (Liljedal et al., 2020).

2.4 Hypothesis Formulation

Despite being involved in the exact same scandal, considering preconceived notions pertaining to different types of influencers, different reactions are therefore expected when being presented to influencers of different kinds. More specifically, we expect that consumer reactions to a scandal will differ between the two types of influencers with respect to brand attitude, purchase intention and the level of responsibility for negative brand-related implications to an associated brand. This is because of the discussed stereotypes with possible shallow perception of the makeup industry with idealistic features, compared to the authenticity associations of the food trade along with possible differences in tangible skill set and gender differences. These views are expected to have spill-over effects due to the connection to the brand and thereby also affect the consumer's view of the company brand that the influencer is endorsing. Looking at these specific three variables brings practitioner value to both companies by examining the impact on brand attitude and purchase intention in conjunction to being presented to a scandal, and to the influencers by studying the perceived influencer's role in generating negative brand equity to the affiliated company brand. Further, it adds to the scarce supply of studies within the relevant field of research. This report aims to shed light on the potential variations in impact, resulting from a shift in influencer type. It explores whether utilizing a cooking influencer or a makeup influencer carries a higher level of risk in a scandal that lacks a direct connection to an endorsed brand. This set the foundation upon which the hypothesis formulation was built. The argued hypotheses are as follows:

H1: People being exposed to a scandal regarding a cooking influencer will express better brand attitude towards an associated brand than if it was a makeup influencer.

H2: People being exposed to a scandal regarding a cooking influencer will express higher purchase intentions to an associated brand than if it was a makeup influencer.

H3: People being exposed to a scandal regarding a makeup influencer will hold the influencer more accountable for brand related repercussions pertaining to an associated brand, than if it was a cooking influencer.

3. Method

This section presents a detailed description of the methods employed in this study. It includes how the methods were used, and to what purpose they served.

3.1 Research Method

While browsing previous research, a question surfaced that later was sculpted into the research question adopted by the study. A deductive research approach was taken where hypotheses were formulated with previous research as a starting point, and the overarching research question in mind. The hypotheses were tested empirically by gathering data through a survey instrument, and later analyzed quantitatively using statistical software. A prevalent method in deductive research (Bryman 2018, p. 50).

The study adopted an experimental method, commonly known as A/B testing, where each participant was randomly assigned to review one out of two scenarios. The participants were presented with a scenario, and subsequently answered a set of questions that assessed their understanding, perception, and reaction. The study was designed to examine whether there were differences in consumer attitude when the type of influencer changes. It also included questions describing the participants to allow for analysis across different groups of people. Both scenarios were fictional, made strictly for the purpose of this study. To isolate the variable that is being analyzed, both scenarios presented the exact same imagery and the same text, with the exception of the type of influencer (Fabijan et al., 2017).

To maximize the follow-through rate, and limit any misconceptions, the fictional scenario was initiated with information about the relationship between the influencer and the brand, followed by an easily interpreted image of a push notification being received on a mobile phone (Appendix, Exhibit 1). The push notification was in the form of a news string where CCTV had caught an influencer, Ina, spitting at a homeless person. Depending on the scenario the participant was assigned, the influencer type varied between makeup influencer and cooking influencer. The choice of depicting a negative picture of the influencer was made to encourage a more thorough reading by provoking psychological investment from the reader, leading to higher engagement (Gregersen & Mercer, 2021, p 138).

The study compared the answers between the two test groups, as well as differences within the participants, such as their respective age, gender, and whether they actively follow influencer(s) or not.

3.2 Pre-test

An initial pre-test was conducted for the purpose of a manipulation check to remove false conclusions with regards to causality (Söderlund, 2018, p. 86-87). The sample space consisted of 17 people for the results to be gathered quickly, and to get an indication whether the content was appropriate or not. The participants were presented with the same scenario as for the main study, but only with the makeup influencer version. Following the scenario was an open question where real-life examples of the same relationship between the influencer and the brand were asked for. 15/17 gave acceptable examples, identifying an influencer with an affiliated brand, where the most frequent example was Bianca Ingrosso and CAIA Cosmetics. The participants were then asked about their interpretations of the fictional scenario in the form of three 1-10 scale (1=Fully disagree, 10=Fully agree) questions, “The behavior of the influencer Ina was beneficial for the fashion brand” (Mean=2.23), “The influencer Ina’s behavior was immoral” (Mean=8.3), and “This scenario was realistic” (Mean=6.47). As the answers were deemed acceptable, the main study could be initiated without alterations.

3.3 Data Collection

To gather sufficient data for the research to be adequately tested, many possible channels were used to accumulate the survey responses. A link to the online questionnaire was posted on the personal accounts of the two author’s Facebook and Instagram accounts. Classmates, family and friends were approached in person and sent a link via mobile communications. And another 120 connections in LinkedIn were asked to participate in the study through direct messaging.

In order to make use of the parametric tests, that assumes the central limit theorem, to compare means, a sample size of at least 30 is required to get significant results (Sang Gyu & Jong Hae, 2017). Wanting to be able to analyze differences between gender within the two

test groups, (assuming a 50/50 split in the gender distribution) at least 120 unique samples were required (30 respondents in all four groups). Due to the possibility of respondents recording incomplete answers, the survey was distributed until it had reached 150% of the predetermined limit, namely 180. When 187 responses had been recorded, the sample was deemed sufficient and the survey was closed.

3.4 Questionnaire

To empirically test the research question, an online questionnaire was constructed (Appendix, Exhibit 2). As the survey was distributed in Sweden, the questionnaire was written in Swedish for the convenience of the participants. Four questions initiated the questionnaire, two demographic questions, a psychographic question, and a behavioral question. These questions served as potential grouping variables when later analyzing the responses. The first three had a nominal scale to allow for mean comparisons, and the last one an interval scale to run correlation and regression analysis on. Following the questions describing the participants was an introduction to the scenario with some background information to consider when being presented with the succeeding news notification. After the scenario, 20 questions regarding interpretations of the scenario, reactions of the scenario and control questions were asked to collect sufficient information to base the research on. All answer alternatives were presented as intervals, ranging from 1-10 to let participants answer with high precision, and to allow for mean comparison analysis.

To prove the internal consistency for the questions aimed to capture the same aspect, a reliability test in the form of a Cronbach test was conducted. As seen by figure 1 and 2, 12 out of the 14 tested sets of questions resulted in a Cronbach's Alpha that exceeded the commonly used 0.7 threshold, allowing to aggregate the questions into single variables to analyze (Taber, 2018). For H1, the brand attitude was measured by question 10-12 in the appendix, together they make up the aggregate measure of brand attitude which is a common concept within academia (e.g. Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Faircloth et al., 2001), proving the construct validity of the measure. Similarly, purchase intention is also a well-used concept (e.g. Voramontri & Klieb, 2019; Zhou et al., 2013), and is a joint measure of question 13-14, capturing the purchase intention which is used for H2. Question 8, the question aimed to test H3, the responsibility pertaining to the influencer regarding negative brand equity due to the

scandal, was a self-constructed question to encapsulate the question at hand, and has thereby not been tested extensively before due to the novelty of the study. The remaining questions were used to analyze other possible aspects and were later finalized in the exploratory results chapter.

Figure 1 - Reliability test for questions pertaining to the cooking influencer scenario

Question	Cronbach's Alpha
The influencers Ina action was immoral The influencers Ina action was unethical The influencers Ina action was offensive	0,894
The fashion brand Balka is good The fashion brand Balka is pleasant The fashion brand Balka is positive	0,882
I would like to buy something from the fashion brand Balka I would like to own something from the fashion brand Balka	0,835
How likely are you to post something about this scandal on social media? How likely are you to discuss this scandal with your friends/family?	0,439
My impression of the influencer Ina is good My impression of the influencer Ina is pleasant My impression of the influencer Ina is positive	0,87
I feel sympathy for the fashion brand Balka I support the fashion brand Balka	0,845
I feel sympathy for the influencer Ina I support the influencer Ina	0,88

Figure 2 - Reliability test for questions pertaining to the makeup influencer scenario

Question	Cronbach's Alpha
The influencers Ina action was immoral The influencers Ina action was unethical The influencers Ina action was offensive	0,857
The fashion brand Balka is good The fashion brand Balka is pleasant The fashion brand Balka is positive	0,943
I would like to buy something from the fashion brand Balka I would like to own something from the fashion brand Balka	0,935
How likely are you to post something about this scandal on social media? How likely are you to discuss this scandal with your friends/family?	0,618
My impression of the influencer Ina is good My impression of the influencer Ina is pleasant My impression of the influencer Ina is positive	0,887
I feel sympathy for the fashion brand Balka I support the fashion brand Balka	0,787
I feel sympathy for the influencer Ina I support the influencer Ina	0,801

3.5 Reliability & Validity

Although the sampling was random to the point where the participants were not handpicked by the authors, it can be argued that due to the sourcing was based on the contacts of the authors, it did not follow a fully random sampling method, due to the whole population not having the same opportunities to participate (Aidley, 2019, p 59). Full validity is impossible to achieve in this setting due to, among others, sample bias and author bias. However, to increase the level of validity, the control question was crucial for irrelevant answers to be filtered away (Parry & Crossley, 1950).

The stability of the study was not tested, but still ensured due to the usage of pre-validated measures. Also, the content validity was checked by the supervising professor, Michael

Dahlén, by reviewing both the pre-test and the main questionnaire before launch, ensuring that the correct questions were in place for the aim of the questionnaire to be fulfilled.

The internal validity was ensured by the high levels of Cronbach's Alpha, enabling for aggregated questions. This is also beneficial as answering a set of questions prolongs the thought process of answering and can actually lead to new insights, and thereby more adequate answers (Taber, 2018)

3.6 Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using statistical software, and the results were presented in tables with relevant measures. All incomplete answers, along with participants who failed to answer the control question, were filtered out to increase the accuracy of the study. The net amount of answers after the filtering was 131 out of the original 187.

As there is no consensus of what an appropriate significance level is, it is up to the interpreter to decide whether the results are significant or not. For the sake of the study, a significance level of 5% was determined to be sufficient for the analysis to be significant, due to its widespread use in the academic studies (Aidley, 2019, p 180).

The analysis was made by both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data and double check mean comparisons, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions. Inferential statistics, such as independent t-tests and correlation tests, were used to test for significant differences and correlations between the two test groups and other relevant variables. Regressions were performed to find the best explanatory independent variables, but unfortunately, no significant answers were encountered, and the results were therefore not presented in the report.

3.7 GDPR Compliance

The participants were informed about the handling of the data that was collected, and had to consent to the participation before being presented with the case material. As no personal data was collected, GDPR compliance was of no issue and the data could be stored locally on

both authors' computers without potential integrity breaches. All data pertaining to the study was deleted after the thesis had been approved by the examiner.

4. Results

This section presents the results from the hypothesis testing along with exploratory tests. Each section commences with a summarizing table containing the tests that were issued. followed by an explanatory text of why the tests were made and what the numbers imply.

4.1 Hypothesis Testing

Type of influencer		Independent t-test				H1: Supported H2: Supported H3: Rejected	
Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	SEM	t	p
Brand attitude	Makeup influencer	63	4,52	1,80	0,23	-2,14	0,04
	Cooking influencer	68	5,13	1,45	0,18		
Purchase intention	Makeup influencer	63	3,58	2,00	0,25	-2,39	0,02
	Cooking influencer	68	4,38	1,83	0,22		
Influencer responsibility	Makeup influencer	63	7,52	2,51	0,32	1,89	0,06
	Cooking influencer	68	6,68	2,63	0,32		

All three hypotheses were tested through independent t-tests to find significant differences in the answers between the participants exposed to the makeup influencer and participants exposed to the cooking influencer. With a significance level of 4%, support was found for the first hypothesis (H1), with a mean difference of 0.61, meaning the cooking influencer group exhibited higher brand attitude after being exposed to the scandal compared to the makeup influencer group. Similarly to the first, the second hypothesis (H2) was also supported, with a significance level of 2%. The results showed that the purchase intention followed the same direction as the brand attitude, where people exposed to the cooking influencer had 0.8 higher purchase intention after the scandal. The third and final hypothesis (H3) was however rejected. Although very close to the threshold, with a significance level of 6%, the mean difference of 0.84 more responsibility put on the makeup influencer could not be supported through the independent t-test.

4.2 Exploratory Tests

For the exploratory tests, all possible variables were tested, however, only the results with a significance level of below 10% were included in the report.

4.2.1 Men and Women

Gender		Independent t-test					
Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	SEM	t	p
Post scandal	Man	82	1,61	1,39	0,15	-2,26	0,03
	Woman	49	2,35	2,02	0,29		
Talk scandal	Man	82	5,06	3,13	0,35	-1,73	0,09
	Woman	49	5,96	2,72	0,39		

Mean differences in the answers between men and women were found in the likelihood to post about the scandal on social media. With a significance level of 3%, men were less likely to post about the scandal with a mean difference of 0.74. Although found more likely to post about the scandal, the independent t-test did not provide a sufficient p-level (9%) to suggest evidence for the 0.9 difference between men and women regarding the likelihood to talk about the scandal with friends and family.

4.2.2 Age Groups

Age		Independent t-test					
Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	SEM	t	p
Brand attitude	18-31	94	5,03	1,46	0,15	1,74	0,03
	31+	37	4,34	2,00	0,33		
Purchase intention	18-31	94	4,26	1,83	0,19	2,47	0,02
	31+	37	3,34	2,10	0,34		
Post scandal	18-31	94	1,94	1,79	0,19	0,55	0,05
	31+	37	1,76	1,38	0,23		

The four initial age groups had to be aggregated into two groups in order to have sufficient samples to make parametric tests. Therefore, the participants were divided into ages of 18-30 and 31 and older. Similar to the previous tests, independent t-tests were conducted to examine mean differences in the answers of the groups. It was found that older people were slightly less likely to post on social media about the scandal, with a mean difference of 0.18 and a p-level of 5%. Further, the brand attitude and the purchase intention followed the same direction, namely having a higher mean answer for the younger group. The brand attitude resulted in a mean difference of 0.69 and a significance level of 3%, and the purchase intention a mean difference of 0.92 and a significance level of 2%.

4.2.3 Attitude Towards Influencers

Actively following influencer(s)

Independent t-test

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	SEM	t	p
Brand attitude	Does not follow	44	4,29	1,80	0,27000	-2,76	0,01
	Does follow	87	5,11	1,51	0,16000		
Purchase intention	Does not follow	44	3,48	1,94	0,39000	-2,20	0,03
	Does follow	87	4,26	1,91	0,20000		
Brand sympathy	Does not follow	44	3,34	2,07	0,31000	-3,26	0,00
	Does follow	87	4,51	1,87	0,20000		
Influencer morale	Does not follow	44	8,74	2,06	0,31000	-2,03	0,05
	Does follow	87	9,42	1,15	0,12000		

Testing for differences between participants actively following or not followed the same *modus operandi* as the previous testing, through mean comparisons by independent t-tests. The responses of participants actively following influencers differed from those who did not, with the latter group consistently favoring the brand to a higher degree. This was supported by their more positive brand attitudes, with a mean difference of 0.88 with corresponding 1% p-level, higher purchase intentions with a mean difference of 0.78 and 3% significance level, and increased brand sympathy with a mean difference of 1.18 and significance level of less than 1%. Further, the group not actively following influencers also perceived the influencer's action to be more immoral, with a mean difference of 0.68 and a p-level of 5%

Attitude towards influencers

Correlation test

Variables	Attitude influencers	Attitude influencers	Brand attitude	Purchase intention	Brand sympathy
Attitude influencers	Pearson Correlation	1,00	0,38	0,31	0,40
	Sign. (2-tailed)		<,001	<,001	<,001
	N	131	131	131	131
Brand attitude	Pearson Correlation	0,38	1,00	0,70	0,53
	Sign. (2-tailed)	<,001		<,001	<,001
	N	131	131	131	131
Purchase intention	Pearson Correlation	0,31	0,70	1,00	0,56
	Sign. (2-tailed)	<,001	<,001		<,001
	N	131	131	131	131
Brand sympathy	Pearson Correlation	0,40	0,53	0,56	1,00
	Sign. (2-tailed)	<,001	<,001	<,001	
	N	131	131	131	131

To examine possible relationships between the overall attitude toward influencers prior to being presented to the scandal and responses afterwards, a regression analysis was pursued. It consisted of the attitude towards influencer's ambassadorship as the dependent variable and different combinations of the effectual questions as independent variables. Unfortunately, no significant answers were encountered, and Bivariate Pearson Correlation tests were instead conducted to investigate potential correlations between the same variables. Significant individual correlations were found, all of which with a p-level of less than 1%, for the attitude towards the brand with a correlation of 0.37, the intention to patronize the brand with 0.31, and the sympathy for the brand with 0.4. The positive correlation entails that if a respondent had a more positive view on influencer's ambassadorships, the named variables were also more likely to be higher.

5. Discussion

The following segment handles the findings from study. What the results could imply, and what benefit it contributes with, both in the academic and the practitioners world. Future research is suggested to allow for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, and lastly, limitations pertaining to the report are then identified.

5.1 Main Findings

The main aim of this report was to answer the question:a

When an influencer is involved in a scandal, does the influencer type, makeup or cooking, impact consumers' perception of a company brand associated with the influencer?

The research question was dissected into 3 measurable hypotheses which were tested via statistical analyses on the gathered data. The empirical results from the hypothesis testing corroborated H1 and H2, while failing to find support for H3.

The results from the first independent t-test supported H1, that the group exposed to the cooking influencer would express a better brand attitude after the scandal compared to the makeup influencer. Due to being a strong driver of purchase intention, the hypothesized effect on brand attitude was also expected for the purchase intention (Rodoula, 2006). It was therefore a positive sign that H2 was also supported, for the joint rigor of H1 and H2 to be enforced. By having predominantly female content creators, and a supermajority female audience for the reason of makeup being more prevalent among women, the makeup influencer profession could be regarded as a stereotypical female profession, whereas a cooking influencer does not entail gender specificity neither in the content, content creators nor audience. Thereby the two influencer types could attain different levels of gender stereotype assigned by consumers. Makeup influencers being more associated with femininity, and cooking influencers having a more neutral position. Despite both influencers being women in this study, due to the different influencer types, gender related stereotypes could shine through, explaining some of the differences in impact on the participants, where a female oriented influencer type leads to a more negatively impacted associated brand. It could stem from the interpreted shallower domain of the makeup industry (Korichi et al., 2007)

where cooking influencer could be seen as having more depth because of the culture and authenticity connection (Abarca, 2004; Hamzah et al., 2016). The reason for this recorded difference between the two influencer types could also originate partially from the tangibility of the skill set related to the profession. Cooking can be seen as a more tangible skill set due to its physiological fulfillment, placing it lower on Maslow's hierarchy of needs and proving its importance for human life. Makeup on the other hand, caters to a social need that is not as essential for our existence, but still has a purpose. This discrepancy in significance, could give a cooking influencer a better perception and thereby influence consumers positively when reacting to a scandal.

The study failed to find support for H3 due to the significance threshold of 5%. Though, considering the rather small sample size and thereby larger expected variance, a 6% significance level could be deemed sufficient for some interpreters. If accepted, the found difference in regards to the level of responsibility between the two influencer types, where the makeup influencer was found to be assigned more responsibility than the cooking influencer, could build on Liljedal et al.'s (2020) previous research regarding gender stereotypes connected to work-life. Similarly to how females in a non-stereotyped profession was favored in advertising, a female in a non-stereotype job, being cooking influencer in this case, was found to attain less responsibility for impacting an associated brand negatively due to the scandal. Pointing to the same direction, these two studies suggest that stereotypes regarding professions have a direct impact on consumer perception.

5.2 Exploratory Discussion

The results from the exploratory tests, showing that women were more likely to post about the scandal, are in line with general theory in the area suggesting that men and women have different motivations and behave differently on the internet (Nordicom, 2022). Muscagnell & Guadagno (2012) concluded that women use social networking sites at higher rates than men. In the same manner, Dill et al. (2013) indicated that women, relative to men, are more connected, use social networking services to communicate to a greater extent, and use mediated technology more. On the other hand, men use the internet for more practical purposes, such as paying bills. Thus, the result that women were more likely to post is in line with differences in media usage behavior between the genders.

Similarly, the exploratory tests pertaining to age showed results in line with theory concerning behavior differences between individuals in different ages. For instance, the lower likelihood to post about the scandal on social media among the older segment is supported by different media behavior among age segments where younger individuals use social media to a greater degree while older segments prefer other types of media outlets such as watching TV, listening to radio and reading newspapers to a greater extent (Nordicom, 2022). In the same manner, motivation for using social media differed between different age groups, people born before 1980 are more likely to use it for business-oriented purposes such as reading news, share political views and connect with other professionals, while younger people on the other hand, mainly use social media more as a communications tool to stay in touch with friends and family (Baran et al., 2016).

The results regarding “actively following influencers” or “not actively following influencers”, showed a clear connection between having more sympathy and a more positive view of the brand, higher purchase intention post scandal than if the respondent was not an active follower of influencers. On the same note, the segment actively following influencers perceived the influencer's action to be less immoral than the other segment. One possible explanation could be that the benefits from the parasocial-relationship, for individuals who actively follow at least one influencer, can affect their perception of other influencers. Meaning, that their parasocial relationship with one influencer grants benefits for other influencers as well. This would in turn extend to the associated brand and could potentially explain why active followers of influencers were more lenient and forgiving.

5.3 Managerial Implications & Future Research

The findings from the study conclude that the type of influencer has an effect on how severely a consumer's perception of an affiliated brand is impacted, when the influencer is involved in a scandal unrelated to the company brand. Moreover, depending on the consumer's gender, age, and attitude towards influencers, people react differently to the scandal. The results suggest that a makeup influencer is likely to evoke stronger emotions when being involved in a scandal compared to a cooking influencer. Both in terms of impacting the affiliated brand through weakened brand attitude and lower purchase intention, but also in the responsibility question where the makeup influencer was given more responsibility compared to the cooking

influencer. This has practical implications for managers within marketing considering the analyzed significant effect of influencer type. Companies choosing to collaborate with other parties will always run a risk of bad reputation spilling over to the company brand simply for the association between the two. The risk can thereby be partially managed, as choosing different types of influencers entails different risk-levels due to having an altering impact on consumers' perception of affiliated brands when the influencer is involved in a scandal that is unrelated to the affiliated brand. This study initiated this niche field with two types of influencers, but to grasp to which extent this mechanism applies, and further exploring which types are more "riskier" than others, future research is required to fill the gap. Some underlying reasons for the different impact due to influencer type is discussed in the report, however, to establish stronger evidence of why this mechanism was found, further studies within the same area are required. Furthermore, building on other ways of categorizing influencers, there are many areas that are either underexplored or even yet to be explored. To fit the "perfect" influencer to a certain marketing campaign, size, gender, content, audience, along with many more parameters, can be tweaked. But how and to what degree requires more research to determine. This is crucial information for companies when developing marketing campaigns, but to have a more stable foundation to build the assumptions on, more research is very much welcomed.

5.4 Limitations

The sampling bias is a problem encountered when gathering data in this limited time. Due to the time constraint, as many answers as possible are sought after to be able to conduct significant analysis and draw explicit conclusions. Therefore, as the network surrounding the two authors stand for the bulk of the respondents, it leads to an incomplete representation of the population. Considering the poorly investigated area of implications on brands when associated influencers act immorally, there is not much empirical data to build the research upon. Further, as this study is conducted on Swedish consumers, the result is not guaranteed across other markets. To have a more general result on how consumers react to scandalous actions of influencers, more extensive studies are needed to draw inferences on border crossing insights. Criticism could be directed to the types of influencers. As the A/B test was conducted testing only two different types of influencers, the outcome could have been

another, had the influencer type been another. Therefore, to see whether the differences hold when comparing other influencer types, further studies are required. To be able to draw further conclusions on the subject, a larger sample size could allow for regressions to be made with significant answers that would appoint a ranking of the most important variables contributing to for example brand attitude or purchase intention for the corporate brand. This would give more insights into what to prioritize, had a scandal like this occurred.

Appendix

Exhibit 1 - The news notification



Exhibit 3 - The questionnaire

The difference between the two versions of the questionnaire was that the type of influencer differed between makeup influencer and cooking influencer

Q1 How do you identify?

Male Woman Other

Q2 How old are you?

18-30 31-50 51-70 71+

Q3 I'm for influencers acting as ambassadors for brands

(1-10 scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Q4 Do you actively follow any influencer?

Yes, several Yes, some No

On the next page you will be presented with a news notice about a makeup influencer called Ina.

The influencer is an ambassador for a well known fashion brand called Balka, receiving payments to wear the products on public events. This is a fictitious scenario constructed for research purposes only.

Exhibit 1

Q5 The influencers Ina action was immoral

(1-10 scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Q6 The influencers Ina action was unethical

(1-10 scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Q7 The influencers Ina action was offensive

(1-10 scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Q8 The influencer Ina is responsible for brand related repercussions pertaining to Balka to due to the incident

(1-10 scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Q9 The fashion brand Balka is responsible for brand related repercussions pertaining to Balka due to the incident

(1-10 scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Q10 The fashion brand Balka is good

(1-10 scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Q11 The fashion brand Balka is pleasant

(1-10 scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Q12 The fashion brand Balka is positive

(1-10 scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Q13 I would like to buy something from the fashion brand Balka

(1-10 scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Q14 I would like to own something from the fashion brand Balka

(1-10 scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Q15 How likely are you to post something about this scandal on social media?

(1-10 scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Q16 How likely are you to discuss this scandal with your friends/family?

(1-10 scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Q17 Please select the number 9

(1-10 scale)

Q18 My impression of the influencer Ina is good

(1-10 scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Q19 My impression of the influencer Ina is pleasant

(1-10 scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Q20 My impression of the influencer Ina is positive

(1-10 scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Q21 I feel sympathy for the fashion brand Balka

(1-10 scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Q22 I support the fashion brand Balka

(1-10 scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Q23 I feel sympathy for the influencer Ina

(1-10 scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Q24 I support the influencer Ina

(1-10 scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree)

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