

Influencer-Owned Brands Under Pressure

An Evaluation of the Rebuild Strategy in Situational Crisis Communication Theory
in Influencer-Owned Brands

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Abstract

This study examines how crisis communication strategies function in the context of influencer-owned brands, with a particular focus on the effectiveness of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) rebuild strategy. A qualitative pre-study, deep diving into the Matilda Djerf case, explored how consumers evaluate crisis responses in influencer-owned brand settings. The findings suggest that consumers assess such crises through a lens shaped by human brand perception and moral judgement, both of which are tied to perceptions of authenticity. Building on these insights, a quantitative between-subjects survey experiment was conducted in which participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: a corporate brand offering either a sincere or neutral apology, or an influencer-owned brand offering either a sincere or neutral apology. The results indicate that sincere apologies, consistent with SCCT rebuild strategies, generate more positive evaluations in traditional corporate contexts, particularly in terms of perceived apology effectiveness. Furthermore, perceived authenticity, operationalised in this study through credibility and integrity, mediates the relationship between apology type and both apology effectiveness and opinion improvement for traditional firms. However, these mediating effects were not observed in influencer-owned brand contexts, where sincere apologies did not significantly outperform neutral responses. The findings suggest that the effectiveness of SCCT rebuild strategies depends on organisational context and that influencer-owned brands may represent a boundary condition to SCCT's applicability. The study contributes to crisis communication research by extending SCCT into influencer-driven organisational settings and highlights the need to adapt existing crisis communication frameworks to contexts where personal and organisational identities are closely intertwined.

Keywords: crisis communication, influencer-owned brands, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), rebuild strategy, perceived authenticity, apology effectiveness, opinion improvement

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	5
1.1 Purpose	6
2. Conceptual Background	7
2.1 Influencer-owned Brands	7
2.2 Crisis Management Models & Situational Crisis Communication Theory	7
2.3 Extensions and Boundary Conditions of SCCT	9
2.4 SCCT in Social Media & Influencer Contexts	11
2.5 Research Gap	13
3. Pre-study	14
3.1 Purpose of Pre-study	14
3.2 Methodology	14
3.3 Sample Selection	15
3.4 Interviews	15
3.5 Analysis	17
3.6 Results	17
3.7 Discussion	20
4. Hypothesis Development	23
4.1 Credibility (H1)	24
4.2 Integrity (H2)	24
4.3 Apology Effectiveness (H3)	25
4.4 Opinion (H4)	26
4.5 Credibility as a Mediator (H5)	26
4.6 Integrity as a Mediator (H6)	27
5. Main Study	28
5.1 Purpose of Main Study	28
5.2 Main Study Design	28
5.3 Stimuli Development	29
5.4 Participants and Data Collection	30
5.5 Measurements	31
5.6 Assessment of Validity & Reliability	33
6. Results	34
6.1 Credibility (H1)	34
6.2 Integrity (H2)	35
6.3 Effectiveness of Apology (H3)	35
6.4 Opinion (H4)	36
6.5 Credibility as a Mediator (H5)	37
6.6 Integrity as a Mediator (H6)	38
6.7 Hypotheses Summary	40
7. Discussion	41
7.1 General Discussion	41
7.2 Theoretical Contribution	44
7.3 Managerial Implications	45
7.4 Limitations and Future Research	46
8. Conclusion and Final Remarks	49
9. References	50
10. Appendix	56

1. Introduction

The rise of social media influencers and effectiveness of influencer marketing have enabled influencers to accumulate significant relational and symbolic capital that extends beyond promotional effectiveness. This development has created incentives for influencers to leverage this capital into their own brands, giving rise to influencer-owned consumer brands (Israeli et al., 2024). Although these brands often perform well, their close association with the influencer's personal reputation makes them particularly vulnerable to scandals, or ethical transgressions, involving the influencer (Israeli et al., 2024). Moreover, research suggests significant risk associated with crisis communication in social media environments (Roshan et al., 2016; Coombs 2017) particularly regarding how influencer involvement shapes crisis management outcomes (Singh, 2020; Mishra & Maheswari, 2025), implying that such challenges may be amplified in influencer-owned brands.

Recent years have seen several highly visible crises involving influencer-associated brands. Djerf Avenue, a fashion brand founded in 2019, has since its inception been closely associated with its co-founder Matilda Djerf, who is nearly inseparable from the brand itself (Lundberg Toresson, 2022). In December 2024, Aftonbladet disclosed workplace misconduct at Djerf Avenue, where Matilda Djerf was accused of harassment, favouritism, and discrimination (Emnéus Ekström, 2024). In the article, eleven employees described poor working conditions and referred to “psychological terror” attributed to her leadership. The following day, Djerf Avenue and Matilda Djerf responded briefly through pinned comments on Instagram. Five days later, a more formal statement was published on her social media (Månsson, 2024). Despite these efforts, the company's financial performance was strongly affected, with a 55 million SEK loss reported in 2025 (SvD, 2026).

A similar case is that of Paolo Roberto, who was closely associated with the pasta brand Paolos. In 2020, it was revealed that he had purchased sexual services, which led to immediate public backlash. He initially attempted to justify his actions on social media, followed by a formal apology two weeks later (TV4, 2020). However, these efforts gave no effect as shortly after the incident had occurred; the brand terminated its collaboration with him and ceased operations entirely (Colliander, 2021). Another example is Margaux Dietz, who faced criticism after posting

a video of an injured man outside her apartment. Following the incident, she issued an apology on Instagram (Palmström, 2022). The company's financial performance subsequently deteriorated, shifting from a profit of 10.5 million SEK in 2020 to a loss of 2.8 million SEK (Resumé, 2024).

These cases illustrate how influencer-owned brands can be heavily impacted by crises tied to the individual, yet it remains unclear why some responses fail to mitigate negative outcomes. In contrast, crisis communication in traditional corporate settings is a well-established field, with several frameworks developed to guide organisational responses (Mitroff et al., 1987; Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007). Among these, the Situational Crisis Communication Theory has been widely applied to explain how firms can protect their reputation during crises. However, while such models have proven useful in corporate contexts, their applicability to influencer-owned brands, where the boundary between individual and organisation is blurred, remains largely unexplored.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine how crisis communication strategies function in the context of influencer-owned brands, with a particular focus on the effectiveness of rebuild strategies. Given the unique relationship between influencers and consumers, the study aims to explore how influencer-driven contexts shape the effectiveness of SCCT-based crisis responses.

2. Conceptual Background

2.1 Influencer-owned Brands

Social media platforms have lowered the barriers to self-presentation and audience building, enabling “ordinary” people to become celebrities (Khamis et al., 2017). These platforms have accelerated the emergence of influencers, who are now widely integrated into marketing strategies as endorsers (Israeli et al., 2024). Through self-branding practices, influencers cultivate a public identity aligned with audience expectations, fostering emotional connections, and enhancing perceived authenticity (Cao et al., 2025).

In addition, influencers are found to foster parasocial relationships with their audiences, shape consumer perceptions and seem credible and trustworthy (Hwang & Zhang, 2018). Collectively, these constructs enhance trust and influence, allowing influencers to accumulate significant relational and symbolic capital (Roth-Cohen et al., 2024). Further, Israeli et al. (2024) argue that this capital extends beyond promotional activities and is leveraged into influencer-owned brands, representing an extension of the influencer’s accumulated capital. However, this influencer-brand blend also introduces vulnerability, as crises involving the influencer may directly affect the consumer brand (Israeli et al., 2024).

2.2 Crisis Management Models & Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Crises have long been a central topic in organisational and reputational research. Mitroff et al. (1987) define crises as events originating from human actions, organisational structures, economic conditions, or technological failures that may harm individuals and damage the natural and social environment. Organisational crises may also have long-term effects on financial stability and organisational reputation, highlighting the importance of effective crisis management.

Early crisis management research primarily focused on organisational processes and operational responses. A basic model of crisis management developed by Mitroff et al. (1987) and outlines phases such as detection, crisis, repair, and assessment, providing insight into how organisations prepare for and respond to crises over time. Moreover, they distinguish between different types of corporate crises, sources of origin, and preventive actions. However, the model provides limited

insight into how stakeholders interpret crisis communication. A shift toward communication-centred perspectives emerged through Benoit's (1997) Image Repair Theory, which outlines five key strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. While useful for categorising organisational responses, the framework focuses primarily on message content and provides limited insight into why stakeholders perceive certain strategies as more effective than others.

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by Coombs (2007), addresses this limitation by placing stakeholder attributions of responsibility at the centre of crisis communication. Grounded in Attribution Theory, SCCT explains how perceptions of responsibility shape reputational outcomes and guide appropriate crisis response strategies. Earlier contributions by Coombs (1998, 2004) and Coombs and Holladay (2001, 2002) established the theoretical foundation by demonstrating that higher perceived responsibility leads to greater reputational damage and that crisis history intensifies these effects.

SCCT categorises crises into three clusters based on perceived responsibility: victim, accidental, and preventable crises. Victim crises involve situations where the organisation is itself a victim, accidental crises involve unintentional events such as technical failures, and preventable crises involve purposeful or avoidable misconduct (Coombs, 2007). In addition, prior reputation and crisis history function as intensifying factors that increase attributed responsibility and reputational damage. Based on these attribution processes, SCCT proposes three primary crisis response strategies: deny, diminish, and rebuild. Deny strategies seek to remove any connection between the organisation and the crisis, while diminish strategies attempt to reduce perceived responsibility or crisis severity. Rebuild strategies aim to restore reputation through apology or compensation and are particularly recommended in preventable crises involving high organisational responsibility (Coombs, 2007). Claeys et al. (2010) further confirm this by demonstrating that rebuild strategies are particularly effective in restoring organisational reputation during preventable crises.

2.3 Extensions and Boundary Conditions of SCCT

Extending the theory on SCCT, later research has examined the psychological and emotional mechanisms underlying stakeholder responses. Coombs and Holladay (2007) show that anger plays a central mediating role in crisis communication, linking crisis responsibility to negative word-of-mouth and reduced purchase intention, highlighting the importance of reducing stakeholder anger in crisis responses, suggesting more accommodative strategies when anger is high to reduce its potential effects. Building on this, Pace et al. (2010) find that apologies are most effective when organisations explicitly accept responsibility rather than merely expressing regret, as responsibility acceptance helps mitigate stakeholder anger and improve reputational evaluations.

Moreover, Choi and Lin (2009) further extend SCCT by incorporating both attribution-dependent and attribution-independent emotions into the model. Through analysis of consumer responses to the Mattel product recall, they identify anger as the most dominant emotion and the emotion most strongly associated with crisis responsibility, demonstrating a direct relationship between anger and organisational reputation. At the same time, they show that attribution-independent emotions can also influence reputational outcomes. Importantly, the attribution-independent emotion alert at the early stage of a crisis can significantly influence organisational reputation, highlighting the importance of timely and effective communication at the beginning of a crisis to protect reputation (Choi & Lin, 2009).

SCCT has also been widely tested across different empirical contexts, demonstrating both its applicability and contextual variation. For instance, Kim and Liu (2012) research on the 2009 H1N1 flu pandemic shows systematic differences in government and corporate communication, where governments prioritised instructing information, while corporations focused more on reputation management through denial, diminish, and bolstering strategies. Both organisations relied more heavily on social media than traditional media in responding to the crisis. Moreover, Sisco's (2012) applied SCCT in nonprofit organisations' crisis responses and finds that SCCT strategies are most effective in extreme crisis situations, specifically when the organisation is either perceived as a victim or as acting intentionally. Similarly, Jeong (2009) finds that crisis responsibility strongly shapes stakeholder reactions, with higher internal attributions leading to more punitive attitudes and behavioural intentions.

In addition, research on digital communication highlights challenges in the practical implementation of SCCT. Ki and Nekmat (2014) examine Fortune 500 companies' use of Facebook for crisis communication. Their findings highlight that there are many cases of inappropriate strategy-crisis matching. Likewise, Kim et al. (2009) find that organisations frequently use denial strategies despite evidence suggesting that such approaches are often ineffective. The study also highlights inconsistent use of crisis response strategies, particularly the combination of denial and apology, which can create message ambiguity and weaken overall communication effectiveness. Overall, this indicates a persistent gap between crisis communication theory and organisational practice, highlighting the importance of translating theoretical recommendations into practice.

However, while a substantial amount of research supports SCCT and the use of rebuild strategies in high-responsibility crises, some studies highlight important boundary conditions. Fuoli et al. (2017) challenge key assumptions in SCCT by examining apology versus denial in repairing trust following an integrity-based organisational violation and the role of evidence strength. The findings show that when evidence of wrongdoing is weak, denial can be more effective than apology in restoring trust. Even when evidence is stronger, denial does not consistently perform worse than apology, suggesting that stakeholder responses are not determined solely by crisis responsibility but also by perceptions of the clarity and credibility of the evidence. Nevertheless, these findings may reflect context-specific exceptions rather than a contradiction of SCCT, particularly in crises where responsibility remains ambiguous. The authors suggest that denial performed relatively well because the evidence against the organisation may not have been perceived as sufficiently clear or conclusive, allowing stakeholders to view the denial response as credible. This suggests that the same outcome may not apply in situations where organisational responsibility is clear.

Ma and Zhan (2016) find that organisational reputation is primarily driven by attributed responsibility, while the direct effects of crisis response strategies are more limited. Although rebuild strategies are effective in high-responsibility crises, their impact is weaker than SCCT predicts, as rebuild strategies are only slightly more effective than other response strategies in

protecting organisational reputation. This suggests that response strategies alone may not sufficiently mitigate reputational damage caused by attributed responsibility. Extending this perspective, Brown and White (2010) argue that pre-existing organisation-public relationships significantly shape crisis outcomes. Strong relationships reduce the likelihood of attributing responsibility to the organisation, regardless of the specific response strategy used. This suggests that crisis communication effectiveness depends not only on message selection but also on relational history and stakeholder perceptions. Taken together, these findings do not challenge the overall applicability of SCCT but rather suggest that its application requires careful consideration of contextual factors such as stakeholder relationships and perceived responsibility, which can moderate the effectiveness of crisis response strategies.

2.4 SCCT in Social Media & Influencer Contexts

With the rise of social media, exploring its implications for SCCT has become increasingly important (Coombs, 2017). For instance, Roshan et al. (2016) examines 17 large Australian companies and their usage of social media to interact with stakeholders during crisis. Through this qualitative study, the authors conclude that firms lack awareness of the potential of social media for crisis communication. It is found that firms did not respond to stakeholder messages and had difficulties choosing the right response strategy, overlooking their reputational risk, implying that organisations do not behave according to existing crisis literature. In practice, excessive use of rebuild strategies is identified, and organisations with the same type of crisis do not employ the same type of crisis communication (Roshan et al., 2016), as expected by SCCT (Coombs, 2007).

Although employing social media in crisis communication presents several risks, the attributes of the social media environment such as interactivity and access to vast audiences make it appealing for organisations to utilise in crisis communication. However, these characteristics simultaneously pose several challenges to organisations. The interactive nature enables stakeholders to generate content, observe an organisation's response to crisis, and organise actions against the organisation. This reduces organisational control over crisis communication and increases vulnerability, as negative content and rumours can spread rapidly (Roshan et al., 2016).

Parts of these behaviours can be identified in what Coombs (2017) explains as challenge paracrisis behaviour. A paracrisis arises when external stakeholders publicly challenge an organisation's behaviour, commonly by accusing an organisation of socially irresponsible operations and demanding change and is a construct enabled by social media. According to Coombs (2017), this is a result of social media alterations of crisis communication which have enabled insights to an organisation's precrisis phase, which previously were protected by institutional gatekeepers, making paracrisis plausible. These developments highlight important limitations of SCCT, leading Coombs (2017) to propose two revisions to the traditional framework, including extending SCCT to the pre-crisis phase and incorporating social media selection as part of the crisis response. Taken together, these findings suggest that the interactive and uncontrolled environment of social media challenges key assumptions of SCCT, while at the same time highlighting the framework's adaptability. In response to these developments, SCCT is not weakened but rather extended, as Coombs (2017) integrates pre-crisis dynamics and social media considerations into the model.

Similar to social media, influencers also pose risks regarding crisis communication. Prior research has focused on influencer engagement in crisis situations, resulting in mixed findings regarding their effectiveness (Mishra & Maheswari, 2025; Singh et al., 2020). Singh et al. (2020) examines influencer impact on consumer perceptions of corporate brands during crises through the lens of persuasion knowledge, which helps explain the challenges associated with influencer involvement in crisis recovery. They find that influencer involvement may trigger consumer scepticism, as such collaborations can be interpreted as attempts to manipulate perceptions and minimise the perceived severity of the crisis. This scepticism reduces the effectiveness of ingratiation strategies, which are effective when used by the brand alone but become considerably weaker when an influencer is involved, in some cases resembling a no-response condition. These effects are driven by perceived manipulative intent, which lowers perceived brand trustworthiness and ultimately weakens reputation outcomes. However, Singh et al. (2020) also show that these negative effects can be mitigated when organisations clearly communicate shared, values-driven motives between the influencer and the brand.

Mishra and Maheswari (2025) adopt a strategically more optimistic view of influencer use in crisis communication, while still aligning with Singh et al. (2020) in emphasising the importance of

influencer-brand fit. They introduce the Crisis Influencer Selection Matrix, which classifies influencers into four roles: trusted humanist, rational expert, empathetic outsider, and detached bystander, based on trait and emotional alignment with the brand. Their findings suggest that in preventable crises, the trusted humanist is most effective in restoring brand reputation when influencers are used in crisis communication. However, consistent with Singh et al. (2020), they highlight the risks of misaligned influencer engagement, particularly when an influencer's tone, messaging, or persona conflicts with the organisation's intended crisis response strategy. Collectively, these findings suggest that influencer effectiveness in crisis communication depends on strategic fit rather than being inherent to influencer use.

2.5 Research Gap

Drawing on the literature above, prior research on Situational Crisis Communication Theory has primarily focused on traditional corporate contexts or on influencers as external endorsers in crisis communication. However, no study explicitly examines how SCCT functions when the brand is owned by the influencer, and the crisis originates from the influencer's personal misconduct. In such contexts, influencer-owned brands blur the boundary between individual and organisation, which may affect how stakeholders attribute responsibility and evaluate crisis responses.

Thus, a gap remains in understanding whether the core assumptions of SCCT, particularly the relationship between attributed responsibility and appropriate response strategies, hold in influencer-owned brands. This study addresses this gap by examining how crisis communication strategies, particularly the rebuild strategy, function in influencer-driven crises, and whether the effectiveness differs from traditional corporate settings.

3. Pre-study

3.1 Purpose of Pre-study

The goal of the pre-study was to develop an in-depth understanding of how consumers perceive influencer crises and evaluate influencer-led crisis responses. Specifically, the study examined how individuals interpreted and reacted to the Djerf Avenue case, and how their perceptions of both the influencer and the brand evolved across the crisis process. The Djerf Avenue case, presented above, was selected as the empirical context due to its high visibility and relevance, representing a contemporary example of an influencer brand crisis. Moreover, the case highlighted a preventable crisis involving avoidable misconduct and high organisational responsibility, providing a relevant context for gaining insights into crisis response strategies, particularly the rebuild strategy. Given the strong overlap between the personal brand and the commercial brand, the case provided a suitable setting for examining how crisis response strategies are perceived in influencer-driven contexts.

3.2 Methodology

The pre-study adopted a qualitative research design, consisting of ten semi-structured, in-depth interviews with individuals belonging to the target audience (Guest, 2013). A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate due to the exploratory nature of the research and the need to capture complex, subjective interpretations of the crisis. In contrast to quantitative methods, which primarily identify comparable patterns, qualitative interviews enable a deeper understanding of how individuals experience and make sense of events (Bell et al., 2019). This is particularly relevant in the context of influencer crises, where brands may be affected by their close association with the influencer's personal reputation, making them vulnerable to scandals or ethical transgressions involving the influencer, as discussed by Israeli et al. (2024). Given the presence of parasocial relationships and perceived personal connections to influencers (Hwang & Zhang, 2018), crises may evoke feelings such as betrayal or disappointment which require a more nuanced methodological approach to capture (Bell et al., 2019).

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format, allowing for consistency across respondents while maintaining flexibility to explore emerging themes through probing questions.

This format facilitated a conversational flow, enabling respondents to elaborate on their thoughts and experiences in greater depth (Guest, 2013). The interview guide was developed based on the conceptual background and included questions designed to capture participants' perceptions of the crisis response.

3.3 Sample Selection

The sample consisted of ten respondents, between the ages of 21 to 26, with a majority of female participants. This group was selected due to its high level of engagement with social media and influencers, making it particularly relevant for examining perceptions of influencer credibility, authenticity, and crisis responses. Moreover, these represent a primary target audience for Djerf Avenue, increasing the relevance of their perceptions in the context of this study (Hansson Brusewitz, 2026).

3.4 Interviews

Data collection was conducted through five in-person interviews and five phone interviews. The interviews ranged from approximately 14 to 22 minutes in duration and were all recorded and transcribed. An overview of the interviews is presented in Table 1.

Each interview began with a screening question in which respondents were asked to briefly describe the Djerf Avenue scandal to ensure familiarity with the case. All interviewees were highly familiar with the scandal and had some form of relationship with the brand, although the depth of that relationship varied. Participants categorized as having a deep connection had previously purchased products from the brand and viewed it as a source of inspiration. Those with a medium connection followed the brand on social media and were inspired by it, while participants with a light connection were aware of the scandal and familiar with Matilda Djerf but were not personally engaged with the brand.

The interviews were structured around three temporal phases: pre-crisis, during the crisis, and post-crisis. Initially, respondents were asked to describe their perceptions of both the influencer and the brand prior to the scandal, including aspects such as trust, authenticity, and emotional

connection. This was followed by questions exploring their immediate reactions upon learning about the crisis, including emotional responses and perceived responsibility. Finally, respondents were asked to reflect on potential changes in their attitudes and behaviours after the crisis, with discussion varying across interviews and including themes such as trust, purchase intentions, and brand perception.

This temporal structure enabled a comparative analysis of how perceptions evolved throughout the crisis process. In addition, a combination of descriptive, structural, and comparative question types was used, allowing respondents not only to describe their experiences but also to reflect on relationships between items, such as the connection between the influencer and the brand, and the conditions under which trust could be restored (Guest, 2013). The full interview guide is presented in Appendix 1.

Table 1. Pre-study Interviewees

Interviewee	Age	Gender	Brand Relationship	Date	Setting	Duration
Interviewee 1	25	Female	Light	2026-02-20	Phone Call	20:00
Interviewee 2	23	Female	Deep	2026-02-20	Physical Meeting	21:51
Interviewee 3	24	Female	Medium	2026-02-24	Phone Call	13:33
Interviewee 4	26	Female	Light	2026-02-25	Physical Meeting	20:38
Interviewee 5	23	Female	Medium	2026-02-19	Physical Meeting	13:37
Interviewee 6	24	Female	Medium	2026-02-19	Physical Meeting	11:57
Interviewee 7	24	Female	Deep	2026-02-24	Phone Call	13:35
Interviewee 8	25	Female	Light	2026-02-24	Physical Meeting	16:13
Interviewee 9	22	Male	Medium	2026-02-26	Phone Call	17:28
Interviewee 10	21	Female	Light	2026-02-27	Phone Call	15:16

3.5 Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, a method for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data through the development of recurring themes. It allows for moving beyond explicit content to capture underlying meanings by systematically organising data into a structured framework derived from an initial coding process (Nowell, 2017).

All interviews were transcribed and subsequently imported into Excel for analysis. An inductive coding approach was applied, meaning that codes were generated directly from the data without predefined categories (Nowell, 2017). Each segment of the data was systematically reviewed and assigned descriptive codes as they emerged during the analysis process. Following the coding process, related codes were grouped into higher-order themes. The final thematic structure consisted of three key themes: human brand perception, moral judgement, and perceived authenticity.

3.6 Results

The pre-study examined how consumers evaluate crisis response strategies in influencer-owned brand contexts. The analysis identified underlying factors that affected how respondents perceived the influencer crisis. Findings suggest that crisis responses in influencer-owned brands are evaluated through human brand perception, moral judgement and perceptions of authenticity.

Human Brands

All respondents agreed on the lack of distinction between Matilda Djerf and Djerf Avenue, perceiving them as closely interconnected. “So for me, it was more like the same thing, Matilda and Djerf Avenue” (Interviewee 3, 2026). With the rise of influencer-owned brands, the influencer does not merely endorse the brand but becomes the brand itself in the minds of consumers. This phenomenon is referred to as a human brand (HB) (Levesque & Pons, 2020). Human brands differ from traditional, commercial brands through embodying real individuals whose values, personality and lifestyle shape the brand. The influencer’s personal identity is therefore directly linked to the brand itself. Thomson (2006) argues that, similar to interpersonal connections, consumers develop strong emotional attachments to HB’s, fostering strong relational attachments and feelings of

belonging. Levesque and Pons (2020) further highlight the power that HB's hold thanks to being "alive". Human brands are perceived as more authentic and relational than traditional brands. Consequently, the company's reputation becomes tied to the influencer, and their behaviour and public image will directly spill over to the brand. This was reflected in respondents' descriptions of a strong personal association between the influencer and the brand. As one participant explained, "The way I see the company matches how I see her. They go completely hand in hand. She is the company" (Interviewee 4, 2026).

Moral Judgement

The close connection between the influencer and the brand may explain why consumers evaluate influencer misconduct through a moral lens. Corporate irresponsible behaviour can be perceived as moral transgressions that trigger emotional and behavioural responses (Grappi et al., 2013). Hence, as influencers are perceived to engage in moral misconduct, for instance through a scandal, consumers may perceive the behaviour as morally wrong. Consistent with this, respondents expressed emotions such as disappointment and broken trust from the Matilda Djerf case, indicating that their reactions went beyond brand-related concerns and reflected judgments about right and wrong. "But it's very hard to recover from something like this. It was a big disappointment" (Interviewee 5, 2026). "So, my image of her definitely changed. I'll never trust her the same way again" (Interviewee 4, 2026). These findings suggest that respondents interpreted the crisis not merely as a reputational issue, but as a violation of moral expectation.

Perceived Authenticity

A strong recurring pattern in the data was that respondents questioned the authenticity of the influencer after the crisis. Napoli et al. (2014) define perceived brand authenticity as "a subjective evaluation of genuineness ascribed to a brand by consumers" (p. 1091). A brand can be perceived as more or less authentic and even inauthentic (Silver et al., 2021), suggesting that authenticity is a dynamic construct (Napoli et al., 2014; Morhart et al., 2015).

Silver et al. (2021) address what makes a brand, individual, or product seem inauthentic by examining a body of existing authenticity literature. They introduce three principles of inauthenticity violations: deceptions, ulterior motives, and adulterations, which arise when

consumers detect inconsistencies between what brands claim and reality. Importantly, Silver et al. (2021) argue that there are differences to evaluations of authenticity and inauthenticity as the latter suggests more than the mere absence of authenticity, but also the perception that moral transgression has occurred. This was reflected in respondents' scepticism toward the brand post scandal "I felt sceptical and didn't want to support it." (Interviewee 7, 2026). Further, Morhart et al. (2015) find that authenticity is relevant for consumer behaviour and is associated with genuineness, truthfulness, and conveying meaning to consumers. Additionally, they suggest that authenticity emerges not only from a brand's ability to remain true to itself over time, but from four dimensions of perceived brand authenticity; continuity, credibility, integrity and symbolism.

Continuity reflects the extent to which a brand is perceived as stable, consistent and true to its core identity over time (Morhart et al., 2015). In line with this, respondents described the apology as inconsistent with the influencer's previously presented image, suggesting a disruption in perceived continuity (Morhart et al., 2015) "I definitely don't see her the same way anymore. Since the criticism was so strong and credible, I believed what was said. It's not a good look to build your entire image around being inclusive, kind, and warm, and then have proof that that's not true" (Interviewee 6, 2026). This suggests a disruption in perceived authenticity, which reflects perceptions of consistency and stability over time (Morhart et al., 2015).

Morhart et al., (2015) conceptualise credibility as the extent to which consumers perceive a brand as honest, transparent and capable of delivering on its promise. Similarly, respondents emphasised that the crisis response felt ingenuine "The apology she did wasn't really quite genuine" (Interviewee 8, 2026), and that the company's values was built on a false narrative "When you found out about this, it felt like everything—her company and Matilda herself—was fake" (Interviewee 1, 2026), reflecting signals of credibility evaluation in the Matilda Djerf case.

Integrity refers to consumers perceptions that a brand acts according to moral values and take moral responsibility. Since respondents stated opinions on rights and wrong: "You don't know who works there, but suddenly you don't want to stand behind her or continue supporting it. You want to be a good person yourself, and if you support her, it feels like you're saying what she did is okay" (Interviewee 1, 2026), integrity concerns are reflected.

Lastly, symbolism reflects the extent to which consumers perceive brands as representing important values and contributing to their sense of identity (Morhart et al., 2015). There were some reflections that could be connected to the symbolism construct of perceived brand authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015) such as: “And they were very size-inclusive, offering sizes from XXXS to XXXL. That makes you think it’s a good brand because of that” (Interviewee 4, 2026). This suggests that respondents associated the brand with values they considered meaningful, indicating that the brand carried symbolic beyond its products.

Collectively, the four dimensions of perceived brand authenticity were clearly reflected in the interview findings. This suggests that perceived brand authenticity plays a central role in shaping crisis evaluations, which will be further examined in the Discussion section.

3.7 Discussion

Drawing on the pre-study findings, consumers appeared to evaluate influencer crises through perceptions of the influencer as a human brand, moral judgement processes and through the concept of perceived authenticity. These insights are elaborated on from an influencer-brand perspective, where crisis responses appear to be evaluated through a unique lens focused on human brand perception and moral judgement which both ties together with perceptions of authenticity.

In the context of influencer brands, the individual and the commercial brand becomes closely intertwined (Levesque & Pons, 2020), and consumers form connections to these brands as explained by Thomson (2006). To sustain these bonds, perceived authenticity is crucial. The interview findings indicate that perceptions of the human brand directly shape judgments of authenticity. Specifically, negative evaluations of the influencer as a person tend to translate into reduced perceptions of authenticity, given the perceived inseparability between the influencer and the brand.

Interviewee 7 emphasised the strong overlap between the influencer and the brand, in line with the logic of human brands (Levesque & Pons, 2020): “She is so closely connected to the brand—she models for it and her name is part of it. So supporting the brand feels like supporting her personally”

(Interviewee 7, 2026). In this case, the scandal led to questioned authenticity, as perceived inconsistencies between communicated values and alleged behaviour were highlighted: “She talks about being bullied when she was younger and about supporting others, so it felt very inauthentic ... it felt inconsistent with the image she had created” (Interviewee 7, 2026). This illustrates how inconsistencies in the human brand image are associated with reduced authenticity perceptions.

Interviewee 4 expressed a similar logic, emphasising how strongly the brand is tied to the influencer’s personal identity: “She built so much of the brand on who she is and that image. So when that cracks, you don’t believe in it anymore. You don’t want to shop there. It feels like a performance—like it was all for show” (Interviewee 4, 2026). This illustrates how breakdowns in the perceived human brand identity directly undermine authenticity and trust in the brand. This is further reinforced by Interviewee 4’s reflection on accountability and response strategies: “With influencers, it’s much more personal. It’s her brand and she’s the face of it. If it were another brand, like NA-KD, it wouldn’t be one person standing accountable in the same way” (Interviewee 4, 2026). This highlights the perceived inseparability between the individual and the brand, which intensifies expectations of authenticity and responsibility. Accordingly, when perceptions of the influencer as a human brand deteriorate, authenticity is also undermined. This was reflected across interviewees’ responses following the apology, where support was withdrawn due to perceived inauthenticity.

Moreover, in relation to moral judgment, Silver et al.’s (2021) argumentation on deception as perceived hypocrisy is particularly relevant, as it describes situations where brands publicly endorse certain principles, actions, or beliefs but behave inconsistently with them in private. This implies that when an influencer’s behaviours contradict their publicly communicated values, consumers may perceive the influencer as hypocritical, thereby framing the situation as a moral transgression. This was reinforced by respondents’ descriptions of broken trust and feelings of having been “fooled” by the portrayed brand identity pre scandal.

Importantly, Silver et al. (2021) argue that some forms of deception may arise even in the absence of explicit claims, particularly through inconsistencies between past and present behaviour (Silver et al., 2021). As influencers continuously project their identity on social media, they may be

especially vulnerable to inconsistencies with their portrayed persona, increasing risks of hypocrisy perceptions alongside inauthenticity. Drawing on the findings from the analysis, this could explain why respondents perceived the crisis as particularly damaging. In the Djerf Avenue case, Matildas behaviour appeared inconsistent with the public communicated identity associated with style, genuineness and kindness. As one respondent expressed: "... I would say she seemed like a very stylish and genuine girl. Her brand was very much about being kind—being kind to herself and to others." (Interviewee 5, 2026). However, the scandal where she was accused of employee harassment contradicted these perceived values. The same respondent expressed: "All the positive feelings I had about her disappeared. She ruined them, I would say. She's still stylish, but the rest doesn't matter anymore. I don't trust her. I remember unfollowing her on Instagram because I didn't want to support that kind of behavior." (Interviewee 5, 2026). This further supports that inconsistencies between past and present behaviour may trigger feelings of deception and broken trust among consumers, ultimately weakening the perceived authenticity (Silver et al., 2021).

Taken together, evaluations of influencer crisis response strategies are shaped by an interrelated set of perceptions. Human brand perception and moral judgement seem to shape perceptions of authenticity, which appear to be the main driver of ineffective response strategies in influencer-owned brands. Hence, perceived authenticity will constitute the focal construct examined and operationalised in the main study.

4. Hypothesis Development

Based on the conceptual background presented above and findings from the pre-study, six hypotheses (H1-H6) were developed to examine how consumers evaluate crisis responses in influencer and non-influencer brand contexts for the main study. The non-influencer brand condition functions as a control context, representing traditional corporate crisis communication settings, while the influencer brand condition represents the focal context of the study. Drawing on the literature related to SCCT (Coombs, 2007), influencers-owned brands (Israeli et al., 2024) and perceived authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015; Silver et al., 2021), the hypotheses investigate whether sincere apologies differ in effectiveness depending on the nature of the brand. More specifically, the model proposes that apology type (neutral vs. sincere) influences perceptions of credibility and integrity, two dimensions of perceived authenticity, which in turn affect perceived apology effectiveness and opinion improvement. The conceptual relationships examined in the study are illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Model of Mediating Relationships

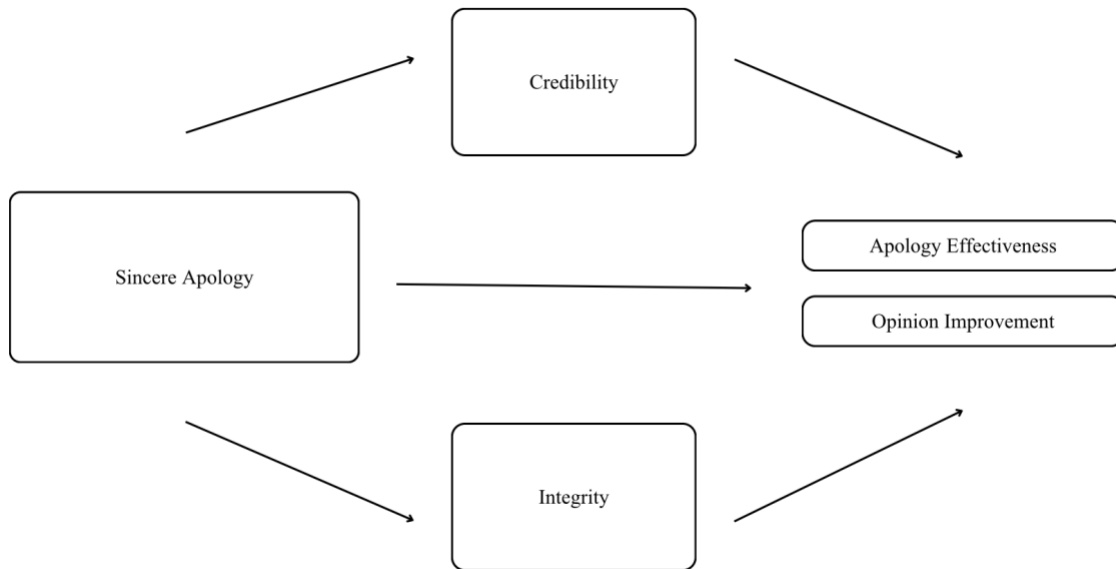


Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual relationship proposed in this study. The model presents both the direct and indirect relationships examined. Although illustrated jointly for conceptual clarity, the hypotheses are tested separately in the analysis.

4.1 Credibility (H1)

Morhart et al. (2015) conceptualise credibility as part of the perceived brand authenticity construct. Since rebuild strategies, such as sincere apologies, aim to restore stakeholder relationships by communicating accountability, remorse, and commitment to corrective action (Coombs, 2007), they are expected to strengthen perceptions of credibility relative to the neutral apology in the control context (non-influencer).

However, prior research suggests that influencer-brand contexts may differ from traditional organisational settings (Israeli et al., 2024; Singh et al., 2020). Findings from the pre-study further indicated that consumers evaluate credibility in relation to influencer crisis. Respondents frequently questioned whether influencer apologies were sincere and described responses as “fake” or inconsistent with Matilda Djerf’s previously communicated identity. Morhart et al. (2015) conceptualise credibility as consumer’s perceptions that a brand is honest, transparent, and capable of fulfilling their promises. As influencer-owned brands are closely tied to the influencer’s identity and communicated values (Levesque & Pons, 2020), inconsistencies between communicated values and actual behaviour may trigger perceptions of inauthenticity (Silver et al., 2021), potentially weakening the effectiveness of sincere apologies in restoring credibility. Hence, the following hypothesis are proposed:

***H1:** A sincere apology, compared to a neutral apology, will result in higher perceived credibility for the non-influencer-owned firm than the influencer-owned firm.*

4.2 Integrity (H2)

In addition to credibility, integrity is conceptualised as a complementary element of perceived brand authenticity. Integrity refers to the extent to which consumers perceive brands as guided by moral responsibility and sincere values (Morhart et al., 2015). In line with the rebuild strategy in SCCT (Coombs, 2007), sincere apologies are expected to strengthen perceptions of integrity by communicating accountability, remorse, and commitment to corrective action, relative to a neutral apology in the control context (non-influencer).

Nevertheless, prior research indicates that influencer-brand contexts may differ from traditional organisational settings (Israeli et al., 2024; Singh et al., 2020). Findings from the pre-study further suggested that consumer evaluates influencer crises through a moral lens. This became clear as respondents frequently described feelings of disappointment and broken trust following the Matilda Djerf scandal, reflecting judgements about right and wrong. Consistent with this, Morhart et al. (2015) conceptualise integrity as consumers perceptions that a brand is guided by moral responsibility. Because influencer-owned brands are closely connected to the influencer's identity and communicated values (Levesque & Pons, 2020), discrepancies between stated values and actual behaviour revolving moral responsibility may lead to perceptions of inauthenticity (Silver et al., 2021). Building on this, as perceptions of deception may arise through merely inconsistencies between past and present behaviour (Silver et al., 2021), influencer-owned brands may be particularly sensitive to weakened perceptions of integrity. Consequently, sincere apologies may become less effective in restoring perceptions of integrity in the influencer-brand context. Hence, the following hypothesis are proposed:

***H2:** A sincere apology, compared to a neutral apology, will result in higher perceived integrity for the non-influencer-owned firm than the influencer-owned firm.*

4.3 Apology Effectiveness (H3)

SCCT suggests that rebuild strategies are particularly effective in crises where organisations are perceived as responsible for the event (Coombs, 2007). Further, rebuild strategies in the form of apologies are proposed to restore organisational reputation by communicating remorse, accountability, and commitment to change. Building on this, Claeys et al. (2010) argue that rebuild strategies are especially effective in preventable crises. Similarly, Coombs & Holladay (2007) show that apologies can reduce negative emotional responses and behavioural intentions, suggesting that sincere apologies may enhance perceptions of apology effectiveness relative to neutral apologies in the control context of non-influencer brands.

Despite this, influencer brands are found to differ in such contexts (Israeli et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2020). Thus, the effectiveness of sincere apologies may be reduced due to intertwined brand

perceptions (Levesque & Pons, 2020) and consumer scepticism (Singh et al., 2020). Therefore, the following hypothesis are proposed:

***H3:** A sincere apology, compared to a neutral apology, will result in higher perceived apology effectiveness for the non-influencer-owned firm than the influencer-owned firm.*

4.4 Opinion (H4)

In line with SCCT (Coombs, 2007), rebuild strategies are expected to be particularly effective in preventable crises where organisations are perceived as responsible for the event, as they can improve reputational outcomes by signalling responsibility and remorse (Claeys et al., 2010). Similarly, Pace et al. (2010) further demonstrate that apologies that explicitly acknowledge responsibility and express genuine regret improve reputational evaluations and mitigate consumer anger. Collectively, these findings suggest that sincere apologies may contribute to greater opinion improvement relative to neutral apologies in the control context of non-influencer brands.

However, as the influencer-brand contexts may differ from traditional organisational settings (Israeli et al., 2024; Singh et al., 2020), the ability of sincere apologies to improve customer opinions may be reduced. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

***H4:** A sincere apology, compared to a neutral apology, will result in greater opinion improvement for the non-influencer-owned firm than the influencer-owned firm.*

4.5 Credibility as a Mediator (H5)

Perceived credibility is proposed to function as an underlying mechanism through which apology type (neutral vs. sincere) influences consumer evaluations following a crisis. Morhart et al. (2015) conceptualise credibility as a central dimension of perceived brand authenticity, reflecting perceptions of honesty, transparency, and trustworthiness. Similarly, Schallehn et al. (2014) argue that brand authenticity positively influences brand trust. Moreover, Napoli et al. (2014) suggests favourable outcomes on consumer attitudes and relationships through authenticity. Extending this reasoning to crisis communication and SCCT specifically, sincere apologies are

expected to strengthen perceptions of credibility, which in turn may influence how consumers evaluate the effectiveness of the apology and whether their opinion toward the brand improve following the crisis. Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

***H5a:** Perceived credibility will mediate the relationship between apology type and perceived apology effectiveness for the non-influencer firm.*

***H5b:** Perceived credibility will mediate the relationship between apology type and opinion improvement for the non-influencer firm.*

4.6 Integrity as a Mediator (H6)

Perceived integrity is proposed to function as an underlying mechanism through which apology type (neutral vs. sincere) influences consumer evaluations following a crisis. Morhart et al. (2015) conceptualise integrity as a central dimension of perceived brand authenticity, reflecting the extent to which consumers perceive brands as guided by moral responsibility and sincere values. As perceived authenticity is found to contribute to positive consumer attitudes, trust and relational outcomes (Napoli et al., 2014; Schellehn et al., 2014), sincere apologies may strengthen perceptions of integrity by signalling accountability and genuine remorse. In turn, integrity may influence how customers evaluate the effectiveness of the apology and whether their opinions toward the brand improve following the crisis. Moreover, perceptions of inauthenticity and hypocrisy arising from inconsistencies between communicated values and actual behaviour may negatively affect these evaluations (Silver et al., 2021). Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

***H6a:** Perceived integrity will mediate the relationship between apology type and perceived apology effectiveness for the non-influencer firm.*

***H6b:** Perceived integrity will mediate the relationship between apology type and opinion improvement for the non-influencer firm.*

5. Main Study

5.1 Purpose of Main Study

The purpose of the main study was to examine how crisis communication strategies, grounded in SCCT, function in the context of influencer-owned brands facing crises originating from influencer misconduct. Specifically, the study investigated whether the recommended rebuild strategy was effective in the setting of influencer firms. The objective was to generate empirical insights into whether the effectiveness of SCCT-based crisis response strategies, especially the rebuild strategy, differed in influencer-driven crises compared to traditional corporate crises. Moreover, the study aimed to identify the underlying mechanisms driving that effect.

5.2 Main Study Design

The study employed a 2x2 factorial design (Söderlund, 2018). The first factor was brand type, operationalised as either a corporate brand (“EL Studio”) or an influencer brand (“Emma Larsson”). The second factor was apology type, which varied between a sincere apology, consistent with the rebuild strategy, and a neutral apology. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions, each reflecting a unique combination of these factors. The use of a factorial design was methodologically appropriate, as it allowed for a simultaneous examination of multiple independent variables and their combined impact on the dependent one (Söderlund, 2018).

Responses were collected through an online survey. The respondents first confirmed that they were comfortable participating in English and thereafter received information about the study’s purpose, confidentiality and GDPR compliance. They were then randomly allocated to one of four experimental treatments (see Figure 2). This ensured that respondents had an equal chance of being exposed to the different scenarios presented (Söderlund, 2018). The dependent variables were apology effectiveness and opinion improvement, while perceived authenticity and its underlying dimensions (credibility and integrity) were proposed as mediators. Moreover, the survey also included questions on demographics and behaviour, to facilitate comparisons between groups.

Figure 2. 2x2 Between-Subjects Design

	Neutral Apology	Sincere Apology
Corporate Brand	EL Studio Makes a Neutral Apology n = 100	EL Studio Makes a Sincere Apology n = 100
Influencer Brand	Emma Larsson Makes a Neutral Apology n = 100	Emma Larsson Makes a Sincere Apology n = 106

5.3 Stimuli Development

In terms of stimuli development, it is vital not to introduce differences between treatments other than those intended to correspond to the causal variables under investigation. Thus, the treatments were designed to be as similar as possible in all respects except for the manipulated variables (Söderlund, 2018). To reduce potential evaluation bias stemming from participants' prior attitudes or associations, fictional brands and influencers were used in the stimuli.

The stimuli consisted of four different Instagram posts: one in which the corporate brand ("EL Studio") offered a sincere apology, one in which the corporate brand offered a neutral apology, one in which the influencer brand ("Emma Larsson") offered a sincere apology, and one in which the influencer brand offered a neutral apology. The wording of the sincere and neutral apologies was kept consistent across conditions, with the only differences being the type of apology and the source delivering it.

The sincere apology stated:

“We want to address the recent reports concerning inappropriate leadership behavior within parts of our organization. We take full responsibility for failing to ensure a respectful and safe workplace. We are deeply sorry to the employees who have been affected. We have initiated an independent investigation, implemented leadership changes, and are strengthening our internal culture and reporting systems. We sincerely apologise and are committed to rebuilding trust”.

The neutral apology stated:

“We are aware of the recent reports regarding leadership behavior within our organization. We are currently reviewing the situation and evaluating our internal processes. We remain committed to maintaining high workplace standards”.

The social media platform Instagram was used, consistent with how influencers have priorly gone out with their apologies (Månsson, 2024; TV4, 2020; Palmström, 2022).

5.4 Participants and Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in collaboration with Norstat, a data agency that collects responses from real individuals (Norstat, n.d.). The survey was conducted and distributed via Qualtrics. Prior to the main data collection, the questionnaire was pre-tested on 10 respondents to ensure clarity and comprehension; no issues were identified. The main study was subsequently fielded from March 24 to April 14, with a target sample size of 500 responses. This sample size is considered sufficient for between-groups testing (Malhotra, 2020). Moreover, larger samples generally increase the likelihood of detecting statistically significant effects (Söderlund, 2018). The final sample comprised 572 respondents.

Participants were recruited from Norstat’s existing online panel, which consists of individuals aged approximately 15 to 80 years (Norstat, n.d.). A demographic quota was applied to obtain responses from participants aged 20 to 40 years, as younger and older respondents were assumed to have less familiarity with influencers. The sample was based on a non-probability panel sampling approach, as inclusion was limited to individuals registered in the Norstat panel (Malhotra, 2020).

5.5 Measurements

All questions, with the exception of the demographic and behavioural items, were measured using 7-point scale measures, ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* (Malhotra, 2020).

Crisis Response

The crisis response was captured through two measures. First, *apology effectiveness* was adapted from previous research on crisis communication (Wen et al., 2021). The original scale includes multiple items assessing perceived appropriateness, credibility, and fairness of the response (e.g., appropriate-inappropriate; believable-unbelievable; convincing-unconvincing). In the present study, a single-item measure capturing the overall apology effectiveness was developed based on prior literature: “The response adequately addresses the situation and demonstrates commitment to change”. This formulation reflects key aspects of crisis response effectiveness in SCCT, including how well the organisation addresses the situation and demonstrates corrective intent (Coombs, 2007). Second, *opinion improvement* was adapted from established reputation and attitude measures (Brown-Devlin et al., 2026), designed to assess favorability toward the focal actor through items such as “In light of this incident, this athlete would still have a good reputation”. In this study, this was operationalised as a single-item measure: “My opinion of EL Studio has improved after reading this response”.

Perceived Brand Authenticity

Perceived brand authenticity was measured using five items adapted from the established scale developed by Morhart et al. (2015), which conceptualises brand authenticity as a multidimensional construct based on credibility, integrity, continuity and symbolism. Given that the study was conducted in a fictional brand context, the original scales were modified to ensure appropriate contextual fit. Hence, only the *credibility* and *integrity* dimensions were included, as the remaining dimensions lacked relevance in this context.

To measure credibility the original credibility item “A brand accomplishes its value promise” was adapted to “EL Studio seems to deliver what it promises” to reflect the fictional nature of the experiment and ensure contextual relevance. Further, a second item to measure credibility was used. The original item “An honest brand” was adapted to “The response feels genuine and

sincere”. These measurements were combined to an index. Since the credibility index consists of two items, correlations were examined to ensure sufficient relationships. The correlation results were .690, meaning the two constructs could be sufficiently combined (Sigudla & Maritz, 2023).

Similarly, for the integrity construct, three original items were adapted. “A brand with moral principles” was adapted to “EL Studio seems to act according to moral values”. “A brand that cares about its customers” was adapted to “EL Studio seems to care about its customers” and finally “A brand that gives back to its customers” was adapted to “EL Studio seems more concerned with genuinely addressing the issue rather than protecting their image”. Again, an index was constructed to capture integrity. As the integrity constructs were measured through three items, a reliability check was performed to conduct Cronbach’s Alpha, which measured to .806, allowing combination to an index of the integrity measurements as well (Malhotra, 2020).

Table 2. Overview of Constructs and Measures

Construct	Item	Source	Reliability
Apology effectiveness	“The response adequately addresses the situation and demonstrates commitment to change.”	Wen et al., 2021	Reliability not applicable for single-item measure
Opinion improvement	“My opinion of EL Studio has improved after reading this response.”	Brown-Devlin et al., 2026	Reliability not applicable for single-item measure
Perceived brand authenticity - Credibility	“EL Studio seems to deliver what it promises”	Morhart et al., 2015	r = .690
	“The response feels genuine and sincere”		
Perceived brand authenticity - Integrity	“EL Studio seems to act according to moral values”	Morhart et al., 2015	$\alpha = .806$
	“EL Studio seems to care about its customers”		
	“EL Studio seems more concerned with genuinely addressing the issue rather than protecting their image”		

5.6 Assessment of Validity & Reliability

To ensure that the measures captured the intended constructs, their validity was evaluated (Söderlund, 2018). The measurement items were adapted from previously validated scales to ensure contextual relevance and strengthen content validity. Reliability for multi-item measures were assessed using correlation check and Cronbach's alpha, with values above 0.7 commonly considered acceptable (Malhotra, 2020). Although the correlation for the items of the credibility construct (.690) falls slightly below the commonly recommended threshold of .70, values above .60 have been identified as meeting the acceptable minimum threshold for reliability in exploratory research (Sigudla & Maritz, 2023).

6. Results

This section presents the results of the hypothesis tests conducted in accordance with the statistical procedures outlined in the methodology. The findings are presented in relation to the conceptual background and conceptual model developed throughout the study. The results are reported sequentially, beginning with the direct effects of hypotheses (H1-H4), followed by the mediation analysis (H5-H6). Statistical significance was assessed at the five percent significance level, in line with established academic standards (Malhotra, 2020), and statistically significant findings are interpreted as support for the proposed hypotheses.

6.1 Credibility (H1)

H1 predicted that a sincere apology, compared to a neutral apology, would result in higher perceived credibility for the non-influencer-owned firm than the influencer-owned firm.

To test H1, a one-way ANOVA with Scheffé post hoc comparisons was conducted to examine differences in perceived credibility across the four experimental groups. Respondents in the non-influencer sincere apology condition reported higher perceived credibility ($M = 3.98$) compared to the neutral apology condition ($M = 3.49$). However, the difference was not statistically significant at the 5% significance level, although it approached significance ($p = .061$). Respondents exposed to the sincere apology in the influencer-brand condition reported slightly higher perceived credibility ($M = 3.93$) compared to participants exposed to the neutral apology condition ($M = 3.71$). However, the difference was not statistically significant ($p > .05$). Although the means moved in the predicted direction for the non-influencer firm, the effect was not significant, hence H1 was not supported.

Table 3. One-Way ANOVA with Scheffé Post Hoc Comparisons for Perceived Credibility

Hypothesis	Brand context	Neutral Apology M	Sincere Apology M	p-value	Result
H1	Non-influencer	3.49	3.98	.061	Not supported
	Influencer	3.71	3.93	.995	

6.2 Integrity (H2)

H2 predicted that a sincere apology, compared to a neutral apology, would result in higher perceived integrity for the non-influencer-owned firm than the influencer-owned firm.

To test this hypothesis, a one-way ANOVA with Scheffé post hoc comparisons was conducted. Respondents exposed to the sincere apology in the non-influencer condition reported higher perceived integrity ($M = 4.10$) compared to participants exposed to the neutral apology condition ($M = 3.68$). Nevertheless, the difference was not statistically significant ($p = .115$). Participants exposed to the sincere apology in the influencer-brand condition reported slightly higher perceived integrity ($M = 4.15$) compared to participants exposed to the neutral apology condition ($M = 3.95$). However, the difference was not statistically significant ($p = .991$). Although the means moved in the predicted direction for the non-influencer firm, the effect was not significant, hence H2 was not supported.

Table 4. One-Way ANOVA with Scheffé Post Hoc Comparisons for Perceived Integrity

Hypothesis	Brand context	Neutral Apology M	Sincere Apology M	p-value	Result
H2	Non-influencer	3.68	4.10	.115	Not supported
	Influencer	3.95	4.15	.991	

6.3 Effectiveness of Apology (H3)

H3 predicted that a sincere apology, compared to a neutral apology, would result in higher perceived apology effectiveness for the non-influencer-owned firm than the influencer-owned firm.

To test this hypothesis, a one-way ANOVA with Scheffé post hoc comparisons was conducted. Participants exposed to the sincere apology in the non-influencer condition reported higher perceived apology effectiveness ($M = 4.63$) compared to participants exposed to the neutral apology condition ($M = 3.99$). The difference was statistically significant ($p = .015$). Participants exposed to the sincere apology in the influencer-brand condition reported slightly higher perceived apology effectiveness ($M = 4.57$) compared to participants exposed to the neutral condition ($M =$

4.27). However, the difference was not statistically significant ($p = .508$). Together, these findings support H3.

Table 5. One-Way ANOVA with Scheffé Post Hoc Comparisons for Perceived Apology Effectiveness

Hypothesis	Brand context	Neutral Apology M	Sincere Apology M	p-value	Result
H3	Non-influencer	3.99	4.63	.015	Supported
	Influencer	4.27	4.57	.508	

6.4 Opinion (H4)

H4 predicted that a sincere apology, compared to a neutral apology, would result in greater opinion improvement for the non-influencer-owned firm than the influencer-owned firm.

To test this hypothesis, a one-way ANOVA with Scheffé post hoc comparisons was conducted. Participants exposed to the sincere apology in the non-influencer condition reported somewhat greater opinion improvements ($M = 3.73$) compared to the neutral apology condition ($M = 3.28$). However, the difference was not statistically significant ($p = .131$). Participants exposed to the sincere apology in the influencer-brand condition reported slightly higher opinion improvements ($M = 3.87$) compared to participants exposed to the neutral apology condition ($M = 3.50$). However, the difference was not statistically significant ($p = .275$). Since there were no significant differences, H4 was not supported.

Table 6. One-Way ANOVA with Scheffé Post Hoc Comparisons for Opinion Improvement

Hypothesis	Brand context	Neutral Apology M	Sincere Apology M	p-value	Result
H4	Non-influencer	3.28	3.73	.131	Not supported
	Influencer	3.50	3.87	.275	

6.5 Credibility as a Mediator (H5)

H5a predicted that perceived credibility would mediate the relationship between apology type (neutral vs. sincere) and perceived apology effectiveness.

To test this hypothesis, a bootstrapped mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 with 5000 bootstrap samples was conducted. The indirect effect of apology type on perceived apology effectiveness through credibility was statistically significant (Effect = .344, 95% CI [.096, .622]), as the confidence interval did not include zero. This indicates that sincere apologies indirectly influenced perceived apology effectiveness through increased perception of credibility. Although the direct effect of apology type on perceived apology effectiveness was not statistically significant at the 5% level ($p = .067$), the significant indirect effect suggests that perceived credibility functions as a mediating mechanism in the relationship. Therefore, H5a was supported.

H5b predicted that perceived credibility would mediate the relationship between apology type and opinion improvement.

To test this hypothesis, a similar analytical approach was used as in the analysis of H5a. The indirect effect of apology type on opinion improvement through perceived credibility was statistically significant (Effect = .333, 95% CI [.107, .579]), as the confidence level did not include zero. This indicates that sincere apologies indirectly influenced opinion improvement through increased perceptions of credibility. The direct effect of apology type on opinion improvement was not statistically significant ($p = .437$), suggesting that perceived credibility functions as an underlying mediating mechanism in the relationship. Hence, H5b was supported.

However, when the same mediation analysis was done in the influencer-brand condition, no significant indirect effects were observed for either apology effectiveness or opinion improvement, suggesting that credibility did not function as a mediating mechanism in the influencer context.

Table 7a. Bootstrapped Mediation Analysis for Perceived Credibility

Hypothesis	Brand context	Outcome Variable	Indirect Effect	BootLLCI	BootULCI	Direct Effect p-value	Result
H5a	Non-influencer	Apology Effectiveness	.344	.096	.623	.067	Supported
	Influencer	Apology Effectiveness	.122	-.076	.306	.294	

Table 7b. Bootstrapped Mediation Analysis for Perceived Credibility

Hypothesis	Brand context	Outcome Variable	Indirect Effect	BootLLCI	BootULCI	Direct Effect p-value	Result
H5b	Non-influencer	Opinion Improvement	.333	.107	.579	.437	Supported
	Influencer	Opinion Improvement	.174	-.106	.448	.124	

6.6 Integrity as a Mediator (H6)

H6a predicted that perceived integrity would mediate the relationship between apology type and perceived apology effectiveness.

To test this hypothesis, a similar approach as for the credibility mediation analysis was applied. The indirect effect of apology type on perceived apology effectiveness was statistically significant (Effect = .252, 95% CI [.062, .470]), as the confidence interval did not include zero. This indicates that sincere apologies indirectly influenced perceived apology effectiveness through increased perceptions of integrity. In addition, direct effect of apology type on perceived apology effectiveness remained statistically significant ($p = .031$), suggesting that perceived integrity partially mediates the relationship. Therefore, H6a was supported.

H6b predicted that perceived integrity would mediate the relationship between apology type and opinion improvement. The same approach for mediation analysis was applied. The indirect effect of apology type on perceived apology effectiveness was statistically significant (Effect = .285, 95% CI [.074, .495]), as the confidence interval did not include zero. This indicates that sincere apologies indirectly influenced opinion improvement through increased perceptions of integrity. The direct effect of apology type on opinion improvement was not statistically significant ($p = .295$), suggesting perceived integrity functions as an underlying mechanism in the relationship. Hence, H6b was supported.

Again, no significant indirect effects of integrity were observed in the influencer-brand condition, indicating that integrity did not mediate the relationship between apology type and the outcome variables in this context.

Table 8a. Bootstrapped Mediation Analysis for Perceived Integrity

Hypothesis	Brand Context	Outcome Variable	Indirect Effect	BootLLCI	BootULCI	Direct Effect p-value	Result
H6a	Non-Influencer	Apology Effectiveness	.252	.062	.470	.031	Supported
	Influencer	Apology Effectiveness	.122	-.088	.324	.276	

Table 8b. Bootstrapped Mediation Analysis for Perceived Integrity

Hypothesis	Brand Context	Outcome Variable	Indirect Effect	BootLLCI	BootULCI	Direct Effect p-value	Result
H6b	Non-Influencer	Opinion Improvement	.285	.074	.495	.295	Supported
	Influencer	Opinion Improvement	.144	-.097	.407	.107	

6.7 Hypotheses Summary

Hypothesis	Result
H1 A sincere apology, compared to a neutral apology, will result in higher perceived credibility for the non-influencer-owned firm than the influencer-owned firm.	Not supported
H2 A sincere apology, compared to a neutral apology, will result in higher perceived integrity for the non-influencer-owned firm than the influencer-owned firm.	Not supported
H3 A sincere apology, compared to a neutral apology, will result in higher perceived apology effectiveness for the non-influencer-owned firm than the influencer-owned firm.	Supported
H4 A sincere apology, compared to a neutral apology, will result in greater opinion improvement for the non-influencer-owned firm than the influencer-owned firm.	Not supported
H5a Perceived credibility will mediate the relationship between apology type and perceived apology effectiveness for the non-influencer firm.	Supported
H5b Perceived credibility will mediate the relationship between apology type and opinion improvement for the non-influencer firm.	Supported
H6a Perceived integrity will mediate the relationship between apology type and perceived apology effectiveness for the non-influencer firm.	Supported
H6b Perceived integrity will mediate the relationship between apology type and opinion improvement for the non-influencer firm.	Supported

7. Discussion

7.1 General Discussion

Connecting back to the purpose of this study, the aim was to examine how crisis communication strategies, grounded in SCCT, function in the context of influencer-owned brands facing crises originating from influencer misconduct. Specifically, the study investigated whether the rebuild strategy was effective in the setting of influencer firms and sought to identify the underlying mechanisms shaping these outcomes.

In terms of apology effectiveness, the findings indicated that, for traditional companies, the SCCT-recommended rebuild strategy appeared to be successful. Sincere apologies were evaluated more positively than neutral ones, which aligns with Coombs (2007), who argues that rebuild strategies, operationalised in this study as sincere apologies, are more successful in restoring reputation when responsibility for a crisis is highly attributed to the organisation. However, the results differed in the context of influencer-owned firms. Here, a sincere apology did not outperform a neutral apology in terms of apology effectiveness. This suggests that the effectiveness of the rebuild strategy does not extend to influencer-driven contexts in the same way as it does for traditional organisations.

A similar pattern emerged for opinion improvement. While the findings moved in the predicted direction, it was not statistically supported that sincere apologies significantly improved the opinion of the company. Participants exposed to the sincere apology in the non-influencer context reported somewhat more positive evaluations compared to those exposed to the neutral apology. Hence, the result is not fully consistent with the intended function of rebuild strategies, which aim to improve an organisation's reputation (Coombs, 2007). Overall, opinion improvement does not appear to be strongly or directly influenced by apology type but rather reflects more subtle attitudinal differences. These findings provided the basis for examining whether these effects were explained by indirect mechanisms in the mediation analysis.

The mediation analysis focused on perceived brand authenticity as a key mechanism underlying apology effectiveness. This had emerged as a focal construct from the pre-study. The pre-study

revealed that perceptions of human brands, moral judgment, and perceived authenticity were the main themes influencing respondents' evaluations of influencer-owned brands during crises. However, the analysis indicated that perceptions of human brands and moral judgment largely shaped respondents' perceptions of authenticity, which appeared to be the primary driver of ineffective response strategies in influencer-owned brands. Therefore, the main study focused solely on authenticity, as the other themes were found to be embedded within this construct. Perceived authenticity constitutes of continuity, credibility, integrity and symbolism (Morhart et al., 2015). However, in this study, brand authenticity was operationalised through two dimensions: credibility and integrity.

Morhart et al., (2015) conceptualise credibility as the extent to which consumers perceive a brand as honest, transparent and capable of delivering on its promise. As highlighted in the pre-study, one respondent stated: "She built so much of the brand on who she is and that image. So when that cracks, you don't believe in it anymore. You don't want to shop there. It feels like a performance—like it was all for show" (Interviewee 4, 2026). This illustrates how a breakdown in the perceived human brand identity directly affects perceptions of credibility. The respondent's loss of trust in both Matilda and the brand undermined perceptions of authenticity, suggesting that the human brand connection is closely tied to credibility, which is a central dimension of perceived authenticity.

Furthermore, the moral judgment aspect identified in the pre-study was also strongly connected to the authenticity construct, particularly the dimension of integrity. Integrity refers to consumers perceptions that a brand acts according to moral values and take moral responsibility (Morhart, et al., 2015). As one respondent explained: "So, my image of her definitely changed. I'll never trust her the same way again" (Interviewee 4, 2026). These findings suggest that respondents interpreted the crisis not only as a reputational issue, but also as a violation of moral expectations. This directly relates to perceived integrity, which is a key component of authenticity. Therefore, while human brand perception and moral judgment emerged as distinct themes in the pre-study, both were incorporated into the main study through the broader construct of authenticity.

Even though continuity and symbolism were supported as dimensions of perceived brand authenticity in the pre-study, the decision to only include credibility and integrity as measurements for perceived authenticity in the mediation analysis was taken due to the fictional nature of our experiment. Continuity reflects the extent to which a brand is perceived as stable, consistent and true to its core identity over time, which could not be captured since the participants lacked prior knowledge of the brand EL Studio. Similarly, symbolism reflects whether consumers perceive the brand as meaningful and representative of their self-identity. This dimension was also excluded, as participants lacked identity-related associations with the fictional brand.

Regarding apology effectiveness, credibility was found to indirectly mediate the relationship between the apology type and apology effectiveness in the non-influencer condition. Specifically, higher perceived credibility was associated with higher perceived effectiveness of the apology. Since the direct effect was not statistically significant, the findings suggest that credibility functioned as an underlying mechanism through which sincere apologies influenced evaluations of the response.

Integrity similarly mediated the relationship between the apology type and apology effectiveness, such that higher perceived integrity was associated with increased effectiveness of the apology. However, unlike credibility, the direct effect of apology type remained statistically significant, indicating partial mediation. This suggests that sincere apologies influenced apology effectiveness both indirectly through increased perceptions of integrity as well as directly effecting apology effectiveness. As with credibility, this mediating effect was only evident in the non-influencer condition.

In terms of opinion improvement, credibility was again found to indirectly mediate the relationship between apology type and organisational evaluations in the non-influencer condition. Similarly, the same pattern was observed for integrity, where higher perceived integrity led to greater opinion improvement, solely for non-influencer firms. In both cases, the non-significant direct effects suggest that credibility and integrity functioned as underlying mechanisms explaining how sincere apologies influenced opinion improvement.

Together, these findings suggest that the effectiveness of SCCT-based rebuild strategies depends on the organisational context, with perceived brand authenticity playing a vital role for traditional firms. In these cases, credibility and integrity help explain more positive evaluations of both the crisis response and the organisation. However, the lack of these mediating effects in influencer-owned firms suggests that authenticity-based trust repair may be less influential in this context. This indicates that rebuild strategies function differently across organisational types and suggests that influencer-driven brands may limit the applicability of SCCT.

7.2 Theoretical Contribution

This study provides important implications for crisis management in both traditional and influencer-owned firms. First, the findings confirm previous SCCT research (Coombs, 2007; Claeys et al., 2010) by suggesting that rebuild strategies work in traditional corporate settings. Additionally, this study explores the underlying mechanisms driving that effect. Drawing on Silver et al. (2021), the findings suggest that consumers evaluate influencer crises through perceptions of authenticity, which influence how crisis responses are interpreted. Furthermore, the study extends previous SCCT research by integrating perceived authenticity into the crisis communication context and by examining its underlying dimensions, credibility and integrity (Morhart et al., 2015), as explanatory mechanisms influencing crisis evaluations. The findings indicate that these dimensions function as important mechanisms influencing positive crisis evaluations in traditional corporate settings. Thus, the study contributes to existing SCCT literature by identifying explanatory mechanisms underlying why rebuild strategies succeed in traditional organisational contexts.

Second, the study advances previous SCCT research by suggesting that sincere apologies, which are typically effective in preventable crises (Claeys et al., 2010; Coombs, 2007), do not generate the same positive effects in influencer-owned firms. This suggests that influencer-owned brands represent a contextual boundary condition to SCCT's applicability and highlights the need to further adapt crisis communication theory to influencer-driven organisational settings. Consequently, crisis evaluations in influencer-owned brands appear to differ from those in traditional corporate settings due to the close connection between the influencer's personal identity

and the organisation. This highlights the need for future research to further examine how influencer-driven organisational forms reshape stakeholder responses during crises.

7.3 Managerial Implications

This study offers valuable implications for both traditional and influencer-owned firms managing crises. First, the findings support the continued use of SCCT-recommended rebuild strategies in traditional corporate settings. Sincere apologies generated more positive crisis evaluations than neutral responses, suggesting that organisations facing preventable crises should prioritise accommodative responses that clearly communicate responsibility, remorse, and corrective intent.

Second, the findings highlight the importance of perceived brand authenticity in crisis communication. For traditional firms, credibility and integrity were important drivers of apology effectiveness. Managers should therefore ensure that crisis responses are not only apologetic in tone, but also communicate corrective action, transparency, and genuine accountability in order to strengthen perceptions of authenticity (Morhart, 2015).

For influencer-owned firms, the findings suggest that standard rebuild strategies are less effective. Since sincere apologies did not significantly outperform neutral responses, influencer-owned brands may need to rely on alternative forms of trust repair beyond traditional apology-based communication. Given the close connection between the influencer's personal identity and the brand (Levesque & Pons, 2020), firms should place greater emphasis on proactive reputation management and crisis prevention, particularly in situations where responsibility can be directly attributed to the influencer, as consumers may become particularly sensitive to inconsistencies between communicated values and actual behaviour (Silver et al., 2021).

More broadly, the findings suggest that influencer-owned brands cannot necessarily rely on traditional crisis communication frameworks without adaptation. Managers operating influencer-driven brands should therefore consider how parasocial relationships, perceptions of authenticity, and audience scepticism may shape stakeholder responses during crises (Hwang & Zhang, 2018).

7.4 Limitations and Future Research

Although this study provided several important insights, it is not without limitations. First, the main study's survey design involved two methodological limitations. The first concerns the measurement scales used in the study. The measurements were adapted from previously validated scales to better fit the specific research context. Existing scales were often highly context-specific and risked confusing respondents if applied directly. As a result, some items were modified to improve clarity and suitability for the study setting. However, this also means that the constructs may not have been measured in exactly the same way as in prior research, which can limit comparability with existing studies and affect the precision of the measurements. Future studies could address this limitation by developing and validating measurement scales specifically tailored to influencer-owned brand crises. Such improvements would likely increase measurement precision. Moreover, the survey included questions that could be interpreted as double-barrelled, meaning that a single question attempted to address two issues simultaneously. This may have resulted in ambiguous responses and reduced measurement accuracy. While this study appears to measure the intended constructs well, additional research should validate the findings using more clearly separated survey items.

Second, the pre-study was based solely on the Matilda Djerf case, which can limit the breadth of insights it provides regarding influencer-brand crises. As participants may have held pre-existing perceptions of the influencer, these attitudes could have influenced their responses and shaped the findings. Consequently, the insights generated from this pre-study should be interpreted as context-specific and may not be fully transferable to other influencer-owned brands or crisis situations. Since this study was solely conducted as a pre-study to inform the main study design, future research could build on these findings by including multiple influencers and crisis scenarios to assess whether the observed patterns hold across different contexts.

Third, relationships with influencers are often characterised by strong parasocial connections, where crises can evoke influencer-specific emotional responses such as betrayal (Bell et al., 2019). In the present study, the influencer was fictional, meaning that participants did not have an established personal relationship prior to exposure. Although this was partially addressed by informing participants that they were familiar with the brand and had previously encountered its

content on social media, this does not fully replicate the emotional depth of real parasocial relationships. As a result, the study may not fully capture the emotional mechanisms central to SCCT, particularly the role of affective responses to crisis events (Coombs, 2007). Future research could address this limitation by using real influencers or existing influencer-owned brands where participants already have established parasocial relationships. This would allow for a more realistic examination of emotional responses, such as betrayal and trust repair, and provide a stronger test of the affective mechanisms proposed in SCCT (Coombs, 2007).

Connected to this, a fourth limitation is the use of a hypothetical, survey-based design. Participants were exposed to a constructed crisis scenario rather than encountering the situation in a natural social media environment. As a result, responses may differ from how individuals would react in real-life settings where emotional involvement, attention, and contextual cues are more immediate. Consequently, the findings may not fully capture behavioural and affective reactions as they would unfold in an actual crisis context. Future research could address this limitation by employing more naturalistic research designs, such as field experiments or real-time social media simulations, where participants encounter crisis communication in a more realistic context. This would allow for a better understanding of how emotional and behavioural responses unfold in situations that more closely resemble actual crisis exposure, thereby strengthening the external validity of SCCT-based findings (Coombs, 2007).

A fifth limitation is that this study focused solely on the rebuild strategy within the SCCT framework. Rebuild strategies are generally recommended for preventable crises involving high organisational responsibility, such as organisational misconduct (Coombs, 2007; Claeys et al., 2010). Consequently, the findings may not be generalisable to other SCCT response strategies or crisis types. Future research could examine how influencer-led firms are affected by alternative SCCT strategies, such as deny or diminish strategies, which are more commonly associated with victim or accidental crises.

Finally, future research could focus on the long-term effects of crisis communication strategies in influencer-owned firms. Since this study only measured immediate reactions, it remains unclear how stakeholder perceptions develop over time. Longitudinal research tracking changes in

reputation, trust, and brand authenticity after a crisis could provide a deeper understanding of how effective rebuild strategies are in influencer-driven contexts.

8. Conclusion and Final Remarks

This study examined whether the traditional crisis management framework Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) developed by Coombs (2007) is equally effective for brands owned by influencers as for traditional corporate brands. Particularly, the effectiveness of the rebuild strategy was examined in an experimental setting. The findings suggest that rebuild strategies may operate differently in influencer-owned brands, where perceptions of authenticity appear to shape stakeholder responses to crisis situations.

More specifically, the results demonstrated that sincere apologies generated more positive evaluations of apology effectiveness in traditional corporate settings than in influencer-owned brand contexts. Further, although the results were not statistically supported, opinion improvement seemed to move in the predicted direction. In contrast, there were no meaningful differences in opinion improvement in the influencer-owned brand condition following exposure to the sincere apology. Additionally, the mediation analysis demonstrated that credibility and integrity functioned as important elements influencing positive crisis evaluations in traditional corporate settings. However, these mediating effects were not observed in the influencer-owned brand condition, suggesting that perceived authenticity may operate differently in crisis evaluations when the brand is strongly tied to an influencer's personal identity.

Combined, these findings suggest that influencer-owned brands represent a unique crisis communication context in which traditional organisational response strategies, such as the rebuild strategy, may become less effective. Hence, the effectiveness of SCCT rebuild strategies seem to depend on organisational context, indicating that influencer-owned brands may represent a boundary condition to SCCT's applicability. Because influencer-owned brands are closely tied to the influencer's personal identity, crisis evaluations appear to extend beyond organisational responsibility. As social media influencers increasingly transition into brand ownership (Israeli et al., 2024) and given the limited research in this topic, these findings highlight the importance of further examining how traditional crisis communication frameworks can be adapted to the unique dynamics of influencer-owned consumer brands.

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10. Appendix

Appendix 1. Pre-study – Interview Guide

1. Introduction

1.1 Screening

“Before we continue, could you briefly describe what the Djerf Avenue scandal was about and what happened?”

1.2 Confidentiality

“Your participation is voluntary, and all your answers will be treated confidentially and anonymized in our thesis.”

1.3 Recording Permission

“With your permission, we would like to record this interview, is that ok?”

2. Relationship Before the Crisis

2.1 (Type: Descriptive)

“How did you feel about Matilda Djerf before the scandal?”

Probes: Did you feel inspired by her? Did you trust her? Did you feel connected to her personally? Did she feel authentic to you? What did she represent to you?

2.2 (Type: Descriptive; Perception/Experience)

“How did you feel about Djerf Avenue before the scandal, and did you interact with the brand (follow online, buy products)?”

Probes: Did you find the brand inspiring or aspirational? Did you trust the brand or its products? Did you feel a personal connection to the brand? Did the brand feel authentic to you? What did Djerf Avenue represent to you?

3. The Crisis Event

3.1 (Type: Descriptive; Perception/Experience)

“Can you tell me what happened when you first heard about the scandal? How did you think and feel about it?”

Probes: Emotional reaction? Did it surprise you? Did it change how you saw her? Did it feel like a personal betrayal or more like a business mistake?

3.2 (Type: Structural)

“Can you list the emotions you felt immediately after hearing about the scandal?”

Section 4: Post-Scandal Attitudes, Feelings, and Behaviour

4.1 (Type: Descriptive)

“How did your feelings about Matilda change after hearing about the scandal?”

Probes: Why do you think you reacted that way? Did the scandal feel inconsistent with the image she usually presents? Trust in her? Connected/inspired by her? Perceived authenticity? Overall attitude toward her? Did you defend her publicly or privately?

4.2 (Type: Descriptive; Perception)

“How did your feelings about Djerf Avenue change after hearing about the scandal?”

Probes: Why did your perception of the brand change (or not)? Trust in the brand? Likelihood to purchase again? Perceived quality or value? Overall attitude toward the brand?

4.3 (Type: Comparative)

“Did Matilda and Djerf Avenue feel like separate entities, or the same? Why?”

Probes: What made you see them that way? Who was held accountable? Did you feel like supporting the brand meant supporting her as a person? Did your feelings toward her influence how you feel about the brand (or vice versa)

4.4 (Type: Structural)

“What would Matilda need to do in order for you to fully trust her again?”

Section 5: Influencer vs. Traditional Company

5.1 (Type: Comparative)

“When you compare Matilda’s crisis response to how a traditional company would handle a crisis, what differences do you see?”

Probes: Expectations of transparency? Expectations of an apology? Expectations of accountability? Emotional involvement? Personal responsibility vs. company responsibility?

5.2 (Type: Structural)

“What factors determine whether you would forgive someone like Matilda immediately after the crisis?”

Probes: Is it about authenticity? The severity of the issue? Her previous reputation? The way she communicates? The community reaction?

Section 6: Closing Reflection

6.1. (Type: Open)

“Is there anything about the Matilda Djerf case that you think is important for understanding influencer crises?”

Appendix 2. Main Study – Scenarios in Qualtrics

Scenario 1 – EL Studio Makes a Neutral Apology

Please imagine the following. EL Studio is a well-known Swedish fashion brand with 2 million Instagram followers. You are familiar with the brand and have seen its content on social media before. It has recently been revealed through former employees that the CEO of EL Studio has repeatedly treated employees poorly. Former staff describe a toxic work environment, including public humiliation, harsh criticism, unreasonable demands, and emotionally aggressive leadership. The story has come out, and it is now widely discussed in social media and news channels.



Scenario 2 – EL Studio Makes a Sincere Apology

Please imagine the following. EL Studio is a well-known Swedish fashion brand with 2 million Instagram followers. You are familiar with the brand and have seen its content on social media before. It has recently been revealed through former employees that the CEO of EL Studio has repeatedly treated employees poorly. Former staff describe a toxic work environment, including public humiliation, harsh criticism, unreasonable demands, and emotionally aggressive leadership. The story has come out, and it is now widely discussed in social media and news channels.



Scenario 3 – Emma Larsson Makes a Neutral Apology

Please imagine the following. Emma Larsson is a well-known Swedish fashion influencer and is the CEO of the fashion brand “EL Studio” with 2 million Instagram followers. You are familiar with the brand and have seen its content on social media before. It has recently been revealed through former employees that the CEO of EL Studio has repeatedly treated employees poorly. Former staff describe a toxic work environment, including public humiliation, harsh criticism, unreasonable demands, and emotionally aggressive leadership. The story has come out, and it is now widely discussed in social media and news channels.



Scenario 4 – Emma Larsson Makes a Sincere Apology

Please imagine the following. Emma Larsson is a well-known Swedish fashion influencer and is the CEO of the fashion brand “EL Studio” with 2 million Instagram followers. You are familiar with the brand and have seen its content on social media before. It has recently been revealed through former employees that the CEO of EL Studio has repeatedly treated employees poorly. Former staff describe a toxic work environment, including public humiliation, harsh criticism, unreasonable demands, and emotionally aggressive leadership. The story has come out, and it is now widely discussed in social media and news channels.



Appendix 3. Main Study – Full Qualtrics Survey

Note: Respondents were randomly assigned to one of four experimental scenarios presented in Appendix 2. The questionnaire items were identical across all conditions; only the scenario descriptions differed. The questionnaire presents one representative version.

Viktig information: Enkäten är på engelska. Deltagande är frivilligt och du kan när som helst avbryta om du inte vill delta. Vänligen bekräfta nedan att du är bekväm att svara på engelska.

☐ Ja

☐ Nej

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. This is part of a thesis for the Retail Management program at the Stockholm School of Economics.

Participation is entirely voluntary, and this text outlines key information about your involvement. You may withdraw your consent at any time, and your data will be permanently deleted. The survey will take about 5 minutes and includes 32 quick questions/statements. You will be presented with a fictional scenario and then asked to answer a few questions.

Confidentiality: Your responses will be kept strictly confidential and only accessible to supervisors, tutors, and the course management team.

Data Security: All data will be securely stored by SSE and permanently deleted once the project ends.

Anonymity: No personal information that could identify you will be included in the final thesis.

GDPR Rights: To learn more about your data rights, visit: <https://www.hhs.se/en/about-us/contact/data-protection/>

By continuing, you confirm that you have read the information provided and agree to participate in this study.

Please imagine the following. Emma Larsson is a well-known Swedish fashion influencer and is the CEO of the fashion brand “EL Studio” with 2 million Instagram followers. You are familiar with the brand and have seen its content on social media before. It has recently been revealed through former employees that the CEO of EL Studio has repeatedly treated employees poorly. Former staff describe a toxic work environment, including public humiliation, harsh criticism, unreasonable demands, and emotionally aggressive leadership. The story has come out, and it is now widely discussed in social media and news channels.



Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.

EL Studio is responsible for this situation.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
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The response adequately addresses the situation and demonstrates commitment to change.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

EL Studio seems trustworthy and honest.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

I believe EL Studio is competent to handle this situation.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

I would continue supporting or recommending EL Studio.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

My opinion of EL Studio has improved after reading this response.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

I feel angered or disappointed by the behaviour described.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

This situation seems serious to me.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

The response feels genuine and sincere.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

EL Studio seems to deliver what it promises.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

EL Studio seems to act according to moral values.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

EL Studio seems to care about its customers.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

EL Studio seems more concerned with genuinely addressing the issue than protecting their image.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

It is hard to separate the CEO from EL Studio.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

EL Studio reflects the personal identity of the CEO.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

The behaviour from the CEO described in the scenario is morally wrong.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

The behaviour described violate ethical standards.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

I feel angry about the behaviour described.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

I feel disappointed by the behaviour described.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

I would distance myself from EL Studio.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

I would be less willing to support EL Studio.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

We are now going to ask you a few questions about influencers. Are you familiar with the term "influencer"?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.

I generally have a positive attitude toward influencers.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

I trust influencers.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

Influencers are credible sources of information.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

Most influencers are authentic.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

Please select the option that best describes your situation. Only one answer should be selected for each question.

How often do you use Instagram?

- ☐ Multiple times per day
- ☐ Once per day
- ☐ Several times per week
- ☐ About once per week
- ☐ Less than once per week
- ☐ Never

What is your age?

- ☐ Under 20
- ☐ 20-24
- ☐ 25-29
- ☐ 30-34
- ☐ 35-39
- ☐ 40-45
- ☐ 46 or older

What gender do you identify as?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary/third gender
- ☐ Prefer not to say

What is your current occupation?

- ☐ Student
- ☐ Employed full-time
- ☐ Employed part-time
- ☐ Unemployed
- ☐ Retired
- ☐ Other

Which brand was the scenario about?

- ☐ Nordic Atelier
- ☐ El Studio
- ☐ Stockholm Threads
- ☐ I do not remember

Appendix 4. AI Disclosure

In the preparation of this thesis, ChatGPT was used as a supplementary tool. During the initial stages of the project, it supported the refinement of the research topic. Throughout the writing process, it was also used to enhance linguistic clarity, grammar, and readability to ensure clear and coherent academic communication.

In the pre-study phase, ChatGPT was used to support the validation of the thematic analysis by assisting in the review and interpretation of identified themes. During the main study, ChatGPT was additionally used in the data analysis process to provide general support regarding technical issues in SPSS, including explanations of error messages and clarification of statistical procedures.

AI use related to language refinement and readability was limited to linguistic support, while guidance related to SPSS and thematic analysis was treated with greater caution and systematically verified against academic literature and methodological source.

Although ChatGPT often provided relevant guidance, some lacked precision and accuracy, hence requiring careful verification against academic sources. This highlighted the importance of critically evaluating AI-generated support rather than treating it as an authoritative source. This outlined our key learning from the process of writing our study, with regards to AI tools. As a result, ChatGPT was primarily used as a supplementary discussion and support tool.

All material generated with the assistance of ChatGPT was critically reviewed, revised, and verified by the authors. The tool was used with an awareness of its limitations, including the risk of bias and the possibility of inaccurate or misleading information. Consequently, all outputs were carefully checked to ensure accuracy, relevance, and academic integrity.

ChatGPT was not used to generate original research findings, independently perform statistical analyses, fabricate data, or substitute the authors' own analytical reasoning. ChatGPT did not replace the authors analytical judgement or decision-making in relation to data analysis, interpretation or methodological choices.