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From influence to infamy: Responses to company-influencer transgressions

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From influence to infamy: Responses to company-influencer transgressions

Abstract

Company-influencer collaborations are widespread, yet little is known about the fallout when both parties transgress. Addressing this gap, this research examines company-influencer transgressions, instances where both parties jointly mislead consumers, and investigates how consumers respond to each party (i.e., the company and the influencer). Using an empirics-first approach that combines longitudinal real-world data, experiments, surveys, and text analysis involving consumers and journalists, the authors show that influencers face greater backlash than companies. This asymmetry is not explained by influencers' prominence or financial resources but by reduced media legitimacy, the extent to which influencers appear legitimate in media portrayals. Journalists tend to focus more on influencers, criticizing them more harshly than companies, which amplifies consumer negativity. This heightened scrutiny reduces consumer identification with influencers; to protect their self-image, consumers distance themselves. The authors further examine three remedial strategies used by influencers, showing how they can restore media legitimacy and improve responses, advancing understanding of transgressions, influencer marketing, and media legitimacy.

Keywords: Transgressions, Consumer deception, Influencers, Media legitimacy, Consumer identification

Duchesnay partnered with Kim Kardashian (364M+ followers) during her pregnancy to promote Diclegis, a medication for pregnancy-related nausea. However, the post failed to disclose the required safety information, prompting the U.S. Food & Drug Administration to issue a warning to both Duchesnay and Kardashian for violating transparency regulations (Guzman 2015). A similar case involved Teami, a wellness brand accused of making unsubstantiated health claims. Influencers Cardi B (60M+ followers) and Jordin Sparks (2.2M followers) promoted Teami products without adequately disclosing their financial ties. The Federal Trade Commission subsequently intervened, imposing penalties for deceptive advertising practices (Fair 2020).

These incidents constitute *transgressions*, defined as "a violation of the implicit or explicit rules guiding [consumer-brand] relationship performance and evaluation" (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004, p. 2). At their core, transgressions involve consumer deception, whether through misleading claims or undisclosed paid collaborations. Prior research on transgressions has primarily examined the effects of transgressions by *either* companies *or* endorsers, and has shown that such events lead to negative and often costly outcomes (Khamitov, Grégoire, and Suri 2020; Knittel and Stango 2014). However, these studies largely assume single-actor transgressions, in which responsibility is attributed to one party. Indeed, in traditional company-endorser collaborations, accountability is typically clear: the company controls both the message and channel, so blame falls either on the company for collaboration-related issues or on the endorser for personal misconduct (Bartz, Molchanov, and Stork 2013; Fong and Wyer 2012). In contrast, company-influencer collaborations involve co-created content and reduced firm control, as "online influencer marketing requires firms to relinquish substantial control to influencers" (Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022, p. 228). Transgressions such as the Duchesnay-Kardashian and Teami-Cardi B cases arise from

joint actions, constituting *multi-actor transgressions*, a form of misconduct characterized by shared and ambiguous accountability that existing research has thus far overlooked. This gap raises a central question: In company-influencer transgressions, toward which party do consumers direct more negative responses, the company, the influencer, or both equally?

Examining this question is critical because multi-actor transgressions expose both companies and influencers to substantial risks. Prior research shows that companies often suffer financial and reputational harm following transgressions (Khamitov, Grégoire, and Suri 2020; Knittel and Stango 2014), while influencers experience losses to personal brand equity, credibility, and long-term career prospects (Bartz, Molchanov, and Stork 2013; Fong and Wyer 2012). In company-influencer collaborations, these risks coexist and may even intensify, as both actors become simultaneously vulnerable under conditions of ambiguous accountability.

To address this question, we adopt an empirics-first approach (Golder et al. 2023; see Web Appendix A), a research framework that begins with real-world marketing problems, gathers and analyzes data, and generates valuable insights without testing hypotheses. We started with an exploratory analysis of a major real-world company-influencer transgression, using longitudinal social media data to show that consumers direct substantially stronger backlash toward the influencer than toward the company. We then assessed whether existing attribution-based explanations account for this asymmetry but found no support: neither prominence (Scott and Davis 2015) nor financial resource advantage (Stahl et al. 2012) explain consumer responses. Consistent with the empirics-first approach (Golder et al. 2023), we returned to both the literature and data to investigate alternative drivers of consumer responses. Because consumers typically learn about transgressions through media reporting, we examined the media's role as a key intermediary in shaping perceptions of responsibility. Drawing on legitimization theory (Bitektine 2011) and media impact research (Stäbler and

Fischer 2020), we focused on *media legitimacy*, the extent to which companies and influencers are portrayed by media outlets as conforming to moral and societal expectations (Deephouse 1996). Lower media legitimacy heightens perceived culpability, as media outlets act as social evaluators that construct and legitimize narratives about the actors involved (Bitektine 2011). Accordingly, we adopted a dual yet integrated focus that examines both media and consumers, recognizing that media responses play a central role in shaping how consumers perceive and evaluate multi-actor transgressions. Across four additional studies, including social-media analyses, surveys with media professionals, and controlled experiments, we first show that media outlets tend to evaluate influencers more negatively than companies following a transgression, with journalists more likely to emphasize influencer responsibility in their coverage. We then demonstrate that this media bias shapes downstream consumer responses: reduced media legitimacy heightens negative attitudes toward influencers but not toward companies. This effect is driven by consumer identification processes, as consumers distance themselves from influencers to protect their self-image (Anaza et al. 2021; Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992). Finally, we examined three remedial strategies to identify which influencer responses most effectively mitigate backlash.

Our research advances understanding of company-influencer transgressions in several ways. First, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to examine the consequences of multi-actor transgressions, moving beyond the dominant single-actor perspective to reveal how responsibility and backlash are distributed across both parties. Second, we extend influencer marketing research by highlighting the reputational and evaluative risks influencers face following misconduct. Third, we contribute to media impact research by showing that negative media coverage, which disproportionately targets influencers, critically shapes transgression outcomes by reducing their legitimacy and amplifying their reputational exposure relative to companies.

Our findings also carry important practical implications. Although transgressions typically harm companies (Khamitov, Grégoire, and Suri 2020), our results show that, in company-influencer transgressions, the media can partly shield companies while intensifying scrutiny on influencers, making proactive management of media legitimacy especially critical for influencers.

Background literature

Conflicts between marketers and consumers are inevitable (Mantovani, Korelo, and Ibarra 2018), often arising from transgressions or breaches of implicit or explicit relational norms (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Banerjee, Ratnakaram, and Lohan 2023). Transgressions typically fall into two categories. Functional transgressions involve performance failures (e.g., defective products, service delays) and tend to elicit milder consumer responses, as they are perceived as accidental or reparable (Hsiao, Shen, and Chao 2015; Khamitov, Grégoire, and Suri 2020). Moral transgressions, such as dishonesty, poor working conditions, sexual harassment, or corporate social responsibility (CSR) violations, represent breaches of trust and trigger stronger consumer backlash (Davvetas, Ulqinaku, and Katsikeas 2024; Klein and Dawar 2004). Within this framework, company-influencer transgressions constitute moral violations, as they involve consumer deception through the communication practices of both influencers and companies.

Existing research has primarily examined single-actor transgressions, in which responsibility falls squarely on one party (Khamitov, Grégoire, and Suri 2020). Most of this literature focuses on brand transgressions, for instance, poor customer support (Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux 2009; Kim and Choi 2018) or CSR violations (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Klein and Dawar 2004; Tsarenko and Tojib 2015) (see Web Appendix B, Panel A, for an overview of key marketing studies on brand transgressions). Brand transgressions

elicit a range of negative consumer responses, including customer avoidance, brand switching, and negative word-of-mouth (Davvetas, Ulqinaku, and Katsikeas 2024; Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux 2009). Such reactions occur because transgressions erode trust, reduce customer satisfaction (Sohn and Lariscy 2015), and negatively influence brand attitudes and evaluations, particularly when consumers perceive a lack of fairness or accountability (Klein and Dawar 2004).

Although studied to a lesser extent, prior research has also examined endorser transgressions, misconduct by public figures such as celebrities, experts, or consumers who lend their image to promote a product (McCracken 1989) (see Web Appendix B, Panel B, for an overview of key marketing studies on endorser transgressions). Positive associations with endorsers can transfer to the endorsed brand through affective attachment (Eisend and Langner 2010) or symbolic meaning (McCracken 1989). Negative associations can also spill over, harming brand evaluations (Um and Kim 2016), purchase intentions (Fong and Wyer 2012), and firm value (Bartz, Molchanov, and Stork 2013; Louie, Kulik, and Jacobson 2001). However, like brand transgressions, endorser transgressions are single-actor events, as responsibility lies solely with the endorser. As Thomas and Fowler (2016, p. 378) note, these are typically defined as “negative actions taken by the celebrity endorser,” involving personal misconduct such as sexual scandals (e.g., Tiger Woods), substance abuse (e.g., Kate Moss), or moral failings (e.g., Paula Deen). Such incidents occur outside the company-endorser collaboration, where the company maintains control (Bartz, Molchanov, and Stork 2013; Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022). In contrast, company-influencer collaborations often involve co-created content and shared public narratives, blurring the lines of responsibility between the two parties (Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022). As a result, these settings give rise to multi-actor transgressions, a phenomenon whose effects on consumer responses remain unexplored in the literature. Notably, the growing body of research on influencer marketing

also overlooks this issue. Most studies adopt an optimistic lens, focusing on how influencer characteristics and content drive engagement (e.g., Barari, Eisend, and Jain 2025; Cascio Rizzo et al. 2024; Leung et al. 2022; Valsesia, Proserpio, and Nunes 2020) or on how companies can optimize influencer marketing strategies (e.g., Lanz et al. 2024; Tian, Dew, and Iyengar 2024), while largely neglecting the risks faced by both companies and influencers when transgressions occur (see Web Appendix B, Panel C, for a summary of the literature on influencer marketing).

To understand how consumers assign responsibility and blame in company-influencer transgressions, we draw on Attribution Theory, which identifies three dimensions that guide responsibility judgments: locus, stability, and controllability (Weiner 1985). While all three are conceptually important, only controllability is diagnostic in this context. Locus (internal vs. external) and stability (temporary vs. enduring) offer limited explanatory power here because the transgression arises from a joint marketing campaign, an internal and discrete event within the company-influencer dyad. As such, responsibility is unlikely to be attributed to external factors, nor does the transgression necessarily signal a stable or enduring trait of either party. In contrast, controllability, the perceived ability of each actor to influence or prevent a transgression, is highly salient in multi-actor settings, where accountability is ambiguous, and consumers must assess which party had greater control over the outcome (Folkes 1988; Weiner 2000). Consumers primarily ask who *could have prevented* the event; the actor perceived to have more control is deemed more responsible. Accordingly, we focus on this dimension to examine how perceived control influences blame allocation between companies and influencers.

Prior literature identifies *financial resource advantage* and *social prominence* as two key antecedents of perceived control and blame attribution in organizational and marketing contexts (Orlitzky, Schmidt, and Rynes 2003; Park et al. 2010; Rindova et al. 2005; Wejnert

2002). Regarding *financial resource advantage* (Rindova et al. 2005), companies are typically viewed as possessing greater financial resources than individual influencers, which may contribute to the perception that they hold more power in the relationship. Prior research shows that greater financial resources are associated with heightened expectations of corporate responsibility (Kim and Statman 2012), including contributions to societal well-being through CSR and activism (Branco and Rodrigues 2006). Consequently, financial resource advantage is linked to stronger expectations of ethical behavior and social engagement (Orlitzky, Schmidt, and Rynes 2003), which increase perceived accountability when companies are involved in transgressions.

While companies are perceived as having greater financial resources, influencers possess substantial social and relational capital, built on trust, shared norms, and identification developed through ongoing interactions with their followers (Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022). This capital is precisely what companies seek to leverage in influencer collaborations. In other words, influencers tend to be more prominent. In marketing, prominence is a relational construct defined by the perceived ease and frequency with which thoughts and feelings about an actor come to mind (Park et al. 2010)¹. This conceptualization aligns with organizational and sociological perspectives, where prominence reflects an actor's visibility and recognition within a social system (Scott and Davis 2015; Wejnert 2002). Prominent actors are often viewed as key decision-makers within these systems, and because influencers maintain personal relationships with their audiences, their misconduct can feel like a personal betrayal (Crockett 2017).

In summary, prior research does not offer conclusive evidence on which party, company or influencer, elicits stronger negative consumer responses following a

¹ Another stream of marketing research defines *brand prominence* as the conspicuous display of a brand's logo or mark on a product (see e.g., Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010). This conceptualization, however, is product-oriented rather than actor-oriented, and therefore less relevant for transgression research.

transgression. This dual dynamic, in which companies possess financial power and influencers hold social capital, makes consumer responses more difficult to gauge, as it activates distinct yet interconnected moral expectations. These complexities underscore the need for empirical investigation (Golder et al. 2023). Accordingly, we begin our empirical analysis by examining a high-profile and widely discussed company-influencer transgression. We then adopt a multimethod, multiperspective approach to investigate how consumers respond to such events, integrating diverse empirical evidence to advance understanding of this emerging phenomenon. An overview of all studies is provided in Table 1.

----- Insert Table 1 about here -----

Study 1 (exploratory): Evidence from a real-world case with consumers' X data

In Study 1, we investigate consumer responses to a real-world company-influencer transgression. Specifically, the study analyzes the sentiment of consumer tweets following a controversial joint promotional campaign involving Italian influencer Chiara Ferragni and the confectionery company Balocco.

The case During the 2022 holiday season, Ferragni collaborated with Balocco to promote a special-edition *pandoro*, a traditional Italian Christmas cake sold in supermarkets exclusively during November and December (C.S. 2019). Consequently, the collaboration was very brief and limited to this two-month period. Both the product packaging and promotional posts explicitly stated that a share of the revenues would be donated to the Regina Margherita Hospital in Turin. However, in December 2023, an investigation by the Italian authorities uncovered significant discrepancies in these claims. While an upfront donation of €50,000 had been made prior to the campaign, no additional funds from product sales were transferred to the hospital. The investigation concluded that these practices constituted misleading

advertising and unfair business conduct, imposing fines on both Ferragni and Balocco. Given the dual-actor nature of the misconduct and the resulting consumer deception, this case aligns well with our definition of company-influencer transgression.

Dataset We collected data using Pulsar, a platform that enables the scraping of tweets based on specified time frames, topics, and users. Pulsar has been widely adopted in social media research (e.g., Davvetas, Ulqinaku, and Katsikeas 2024). We gathered tweets from regular users, excluding accounts belonging to companies, media outlets, and content creators, that mentioned either Chiara Ferragni or Balocco. Consistent with recommendations for maintaining independence in group comparisons (Kenny and Judd 1986), we did not collect tweets that mentioned both Ferragni and Balocco. Such mixed tweets would violate this assumption by conflating sentiments toward both actors, thereby limiting our ability to isolate whether backlash was directed at the influencer or the company². The dataset covers two main periods: January 2022 to October 2022, prior to their collaboration, and December 2023 to July 2024, following the official announcement of fines.

To ensure a cleaner research design, we excluded tweets posted in August 2022, when Balocco's owner died in an accident. Tweets mentioning Balocco during this period consisted overwhelmingly of expressions of condolence unrelated to either the collaboration or the transgression and could therefore introduce noise³. The final dataset contains 80,314 tweets (1,236 mentioning Balocco and 79,078 mentioning Ferragni). In Web Appendix C, Panel A, we report illustrative examples of the tweets in our dataset.

Variables Our independent variable distinguishes between tweets mentioning the influencer and those mentioning the company. This variable is operationalized as a dummy variable that takes the value of one if the tweet mentions the influencer (treatment group) and zero if it

² We subsequently collected the tweets mentioning both Balocco and Ferragni and report supplementary analyses in Web Appendix C, Panel D.

³ In Web Appendix C, Panel C, we replicate our analyses (i) using an alternative measure of sentiment, (ii) including August 2022, (iii) including the collaboration period within the pretreatment window.

mentions the company (control group). It does not capture any additional construct but simply differentiates the topic of the online conversation. We examine how responses toward the influencer and the company change following the transgression. Thus, a second key variable is time, operationalized as a dummy variable that takes the value of one for tweets posted after the transgression (treatment period) and zero for tweets posted before the collaboration (pretreatment period). Our dependent variable is tweet sentiment, measured using the IBM Watson's sentiment score. This continuous variable ranges from -2.28 to +2.28, with zero indicating neutral sentiment ($M = 0.0397$, $SD = 0.419$). We used the IBM Watson's sentiment score because it relies on a hybrid approach that combines syntactic parsing, semantic analysis, and supervised learning to assess sentiment on a continuous scale while also providing categorical classifications. This tool has been widely adopted in academic research on social media sentiment, including Twitter, due to its robustness in handling informal language, emojis, and idiomatic expressions typical of user-generated content (Davvetas, Ulqinaku, and Katsikeas 2024; Latinovic and Chatterjee 2022). Given the brevity and affective nature of the tweets in our dataset, this sentiment engine is well suited to our research objectives.

Results We tested the effect of the influencer (vs. the company) on tweet sentiment using a difference-in-differences (DID) design⁴. Descriptive statistics for this study and all subsequent studies are reported in Web Appendix D. We began our analysis with an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model (Model 1, Table 2) to estimate the effect of the transgression on tweet sentiment toward the influencer and the company. The results show that the interaction between time and our independent variable has a significant negative effect on sentiment ($b = -0.097$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.233$). Following the transgression, the reduction in consumer sentiment expressed in tweets is more pronounced for Chiara Ferragni

⁴ We tested the parallel trends assumption in Web Appendix C, Panel B.

than for Balocco, relative to the pretreatment period. In subsequent models, we account for repeated measures, user-specific characteristics, and unobserved heterogeneity at the user level. These analyses provide consistent evidence that the transgression significantly affected consumer sentiment, with Ferragni receiving more negative responses than Balocco.

----- Insert Table 2 about here -----

Because individual users may have tweeted multiple times about either Ferragni or Balocco, we addressed potential nonindependence in the data. In Model 2 (Table 2), we replicated the analysis while clustering standard errors at the user level. The results remained consistent ($b = -0.097$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.233$). Clustering standard errors accounts for repeated measures from the same users, ensuring that the findings are not driven by individual-level patterns or noise. To further refine the analysis, we included user-specific covariates in Model 3 (Table 2). Using data provided by Pulsar, we controlled for user gender (female, male, or unknown), user country (operationalized as Italy vs. other), and number of followers. The results remained stable with these covariates ($b = -0.119$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.286$). Finally, in Model 4 (Table 2), we adopted an even more conservative approach by incorporating user-level fixed effects. This specification controls for all time-invariant user characteristics and accounts for unobserved heterogeneity at the user level. Even under this stringent specification, the results remained consistent ($b = -0.143$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.343$). Model 3 in Table 2 shows that user-level covariates, specifically gender and country of origin, significantly influence the dependent variable. Consequently, we used these covariates to match the control and treatment groups. The Kernel propensity score matching estimate indicates a consistent negative effect on sentiment toward the influencer ($b = -0.145$, $p < .001$; detailed results available upon reasonable request).

Discussion In this exploratory study, we find that consumers respond more negatively to the influencer than to the company following a multi-actor transgression. Attribution theory

suggests that this asymmetry in blame may stem from perceptions of prominence, whereby consumers view the more visible actor as more responsible. To test this explanation, in Study 2a, we manipulate the relative prominence of the influencer and the company and examine its effect on consumer attitudes. In Study 2b, we investigate a second potential mechanism derived from attribution theory: backlash may be stronger toward the actor perceived as having greater financial resources.

Study 2: Prominence and financial resource advantage as determinants of consumer responses

Study 2a: Prominence

The aim of this study is to test the role of prominence on consumer responses to company-influencer transgressions. We employed a between-subject experimental design in which we manipulated the prominence of the influencer and the company and examined its effect on consumer responses. To enhance generalizability, we used a fictional transgression. However, prominence cannot be easily fictionalized without jeopardizing ecological validity, as the visibility of transgression actors in consumers' daily lives plays a crucial role in shaping responses. Accordingly, we relied on real influencers and companies to preserve ecological validity. For the prominent influencer, we selected Khloé Kardashian (304M+ followers), and for the nonprominent influencer, we chose Rachel Zeilic (114K followers). Both operate in the lifestyle and beauty space, ensuring domain comparability. To create a credible fictional collaboration, we also selected two beauty-related brands: Sephora (prominent; 23M followers, \$17.8B in revenue, 52,000 employees) and Oribe (nonprominent; 478K followers, \$112.6M in revenue, 359 employees). To ensure that our findings were not driven by an inadequate manipulation of prominence, we conducted a separate validation study (reported in Web Appendix E, Panel A) confirming that our stimuli effectively represented distinct

levels of prominence for both influencers and companies. The results show high reliability, internal consistency, and clear mean differences between prominent and nonprominent actors (both companies and influencers), while maintaining comparability across influencer and brand categories. This study was preregistered on aspredicted.org (<https://aspredicted.org/fhj2-pmx9.pdf>).

Participants and method We requested a sample of 400 participants residing in the United States through Prolific, an online consumer panel (final $N = 401$; 52.37% female, 47.38% male, <1% other or did not disclose; $M_{\text{age}} = 41.28$ years, $SD = 13.86$). We informed participants that they would read information about a collaboration between a company and an influencer. We manipulated prominence (see Web Appendix E, Panel B, for the full stimuli) by randomly assigning participants to one of four conditions: prominent influencer and prominent company, prominent influencer and nonprominent company, nonprominent influencer and prominent company, and nonprominent influencer and nonprominent company. In all conditions, participants read that the company and the influencer were facing backlash for allegedly deceiving consumers and followers by promoting a philanthropic campaign using false claims. The company and the influencer had falsely advertised that the profits entirely supported a research institution, whereas in reality a portion of the profits had been retained by both the influencer and the company.

Next, participants rated their attitudes toward the influencer and the company on two four-item attitude measures: “My attitude toward the influencer [company] is ...” (1) “bad/good,” (2) “unfavorable/favorable,” (3) “undesirable/desirable,” and (4) “harmful/beneficial” (seven-point scale; $\alpha_{\text{influencer}} = .98$; $M_{\text{influencer}} = 3.03$, $SD = 1.94$; eigenvalue = 3.75; $\alpha_{\text{company}} = .98$; $M_{\text{company}} = 3.15$, $SD = 1.96$; eigenvalue = 3.76). Finally, we thanked participants for their time, informed them that the scenario was fictional, and compensated them accordingly.

Results We tested the effect of prominence on consumer responses to influencers and companies separately using one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs), with each of the prominence combinations as the independent grouping variable and consumer attitude as the dependent variable and proxy for consumer responses. We found no significant overall effect of prominence on consumer attitudes toward either the company ($p = .56$) or the influencer ($p = .17$). For robustness, we also analyzed the data using a two-way ANOVA, with company prominence (prominent vs. nonprominent) and influencer prominence (prominent vs. nonprominent) as the two factors. There was no interaction effect between company prominence and influencer prominence on consumer attitudes toward the company ($p = .18$) or the influencer ($p = .35$).

Discussion The objective of Study 2a was to causally test the role of prominence in driving consumer responses to the influencer, thereby providing a potential explanation for the findings of Study 1, in which the influencer received the most negative responses. However, the results do not provide evidence that prominence drives these responses.

Study 2b: Financial resource advantage

The aim of this study is to test the role of financial resource advantage on consumer responses to company-influencer transgressions. For this, we test this relationship in an experimental study where we manipulate the financial resource advantage of the influencer (vs. the company).

Participants and method We recruited 300 participants in the United States through Prolific (final $N = 301$; 69.10% female, 29.24% male, with the remainder identifying as other or not disclosing; $M_{\text{age}} = 39.93$ years, $SD = 12.50$) to take part in the study in return for monetary compensation. Prolific settings were used to exclude individuals who may have taken part in other studies reported in this paper.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: influencer's financial resource advantage, company's financial resource advantage, or control. All participants read about a philanthropic campaign jointly promoted by the influencer Isaac Grace and the gaming company GameGlow (both fictional) that resulted in a transgression involving false advertising claims. In the influencer's financial resource advantage condition, Grace was described as a multimillionaire with a net worth of \$45 million, while GameGlow was portrayed as a small startup with a net worth of \$50,000. In the company's financial resource advantage condition, these roles were reversed: Grace had a net worth of \$50,000 and GameGlow was presented as a market-leading company valued at \$45 million. In the control condition, no financial information was provided for either party. The transgression scenario was otherwise identical across conditions (see Web Appendix F for the full stimuli).

After reading the scenario, participants rated their attitudes toward the influencer and the company separately, in random order, using the same scale of Study 2a ($\alpha_{\text{influencer}} = .92$; $M_{\text{influencer}} = 2.02$, $SD = 1.03$, eigenvalue = 3.26; $\alpha_{\text{company}} = .94$; $M_{\text{company}} = 2.11$, $SD = 1.15$, eigenvalue = 3.46). Participants then reported their age and gender. Finally, they were thanked for their time and debriefed that the scenario was fictional and presented solely for research purposes.

Results We tested the effect of financial resource advantage on consumer responses with a one-way ANOVA with financial resource advantage as the independent grouping variable and consumer attitudes as the dependent variable, serving as a proxy for consumer responses. We did not find a significant effect of financial resource advantage on consumer attitudes toward the influencer ($M_{\text{influencer's financial resource advantage}} = 2.05$ vs. $M_{\text{company's financial resource advantage}} = 1.98$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 2.04$; $F(2, 298) = 0.15$, $p = .86$, $\eta^2 = .001$). However, we found a significant effect of financial resource advantage on consumer attitudes toward the company ($M_{\text{influencer's financial resource advantage}} = 2.20$ vs. $M_{\text{company's financial resource advantage}} = 2.24$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} =$

1.88; $F(2, 298) = 3.07, p = .048, \eta^2 = .02$). However, while there was a significant difference between company's financial resource advantage and control (delta = 0.37, SE = 0.16, 95% CI = [0.05, 0.69]) and a significant difference between influencer's financial resource advantage and control (delta = 0.32, SE = 0.16, 95% CI = [0.01, 0.64]), there was no difference between influencer's and company's financial resource advantages (delta = -0.04, SE = 0.16, 95% CI = [-0.36, 0.27]).

Discussion The results show that financial resource advantage does not explain the asymmetry observed in Study 1. Taken together with the findings from Study 2a on prominence, these inconclusive results underscore the need for further theoretical and empirical exploration (Golder et al. 2023), which we pursue in the next set of studies.

Redefining the scope: Investigating alternative determinants of consumer responses

At this stage of our empirics-first approach, we further examined evidence from previous research and broadened the research question to deepen our understanding of consumer responses to multi-actor transgressions (Golder et al. 2023). As noted, although Study 1 showed that the influencer elicited more negative responses, Studies 2a and 2b ruled out prominence and financial resource advantage, our initially theorized drivers of consumer responses, as explanatory mechanisms. Accordingly, our approach aligns with Golder et al. (2023, p. 326), who observe that “higher-order insights may arise from new research questions and/or a scope unanticipated at the start.” Adopting this perspective, we returned to the literature to identify a determinant other than prominence and financial resource advantage that may shape consumer responses to company-influencer transgressions.

One fact we initially overlooked is that consumers typically learn about transgressions through the media. At first, this seemed irrelevant because, according to Stähler and Fischer

(2020), media coverage, that is, *how many* media outlets report on the transgression, is closely associated with prominence. Thus, media coverage has generally been treated as an aspect of prominence, which does not appear to explain the results of Study 1. However, in the context of company-influencer transgressions, the critical factor may not be *how many* media outlets report on the transgression, but rather *how* they report on it, specifically, which actor they criticize more strongly.

Indeed, the organizational legitimacy literature identifies the media as one of the most authoritative legitimizers through which a company (or an influencer) can gain acceptance, credibility, and approval from consumers (Bansal and Clelland 2004; Deephouse 1996; Pollock and Rindova 2003). The outcome of this legitimation process is referred to as *media legitimacy* and is conveyed through various channels, including print, television, radio, and social media (Deephouse 1996). Media legitimacy primarily operates as an evaluative mechanism: the media performs an auditing and monitoring role by scrutinizing organizational activities and reporting on illegitimate behavior (Deephouse 1996). Consequently, media portrayals often serve as a proxy for an organization's legitimacy (Bansal and Clelland 2004). For example, Pollock and Rindova (2003) emphasize the media's role as an information intermediary, arguing that the characteristics of media coverage shape how investors and other stakeholders form impressions of companies. Through both the tone of its communications and its extensive reach, the media can substantially influence audiences' perceptions of an organization's legitimacy, or lack thereof (Deephouse 1996).

Building on this perspective, media legitimacy may be the factor shaping consumer responses. When two parties are involved in a transgression, attribution of accountability becomes ambiguous, prompting consumers to rely more heavily on the narrative constructed and conveyed by the media. Although little is known about which party journalists emphasize

in multi-actor transgressions, prior research suggests that media content is not purely informational but also relational: journalists may curate stories in ways that engage and resonate with their audiences (Molyneux 2015). This raises the possibility that certain actors, such as influencers, might attract more critical scrutiny, not solely because of their role in the transgression, but because of how audiences relate to and evaluate them.

To further explore this possibility, we draw on Social Influence Theory (Kelman 1958, 1961), which identifies three mechanisms through which influence operates: compliance, internalization, and identification. Compliance occurs when individuals accept influence to obtain rewards or avoid punishment, whereas internalization arises when a message aligns with one's values. In the context of influencer-follower relationships, however, compliance is unlikely to play a major role, as influencers lack coercive authority or the ability to offer material rewards. Internalization may occur in specific instances, such as when influencers promote causes or values that resonate with their audience, but this mechanism is generally limited, as influencer persuasion more often centers on lifestyle appeal than on deep ideological alignment. Instead, identification emerges as a particularly relevant pathway: followers adopt attitudes or behaviors to associate with the influencer and achieve self-defining goals (Barari, Eisend, and Jain 2025; Davlembayeva, Chari, and Papagiannidis 2025). This bond of identification is built, among others, on perceptions of empathy, fairness, and credibility (Davlembayeva, Chari, and Papagiannidis 2025), making it particularly vulnerable to media criticism. When the media portrays influencers as untrustworthy or inauthentic, it can severely undermine this relationship, triggering stronger backlash as consumers distance themselves to protect their self-image. Indeed, journalists themselves act as influential social agents whose authority shapes public interpretations of trustworthiness and culpability (Bitektine 2011). As a result, media-induced losses of legitimacy may be

especially consequential for influencers, whose persuasive power rests on identification rather than institutional authority (Deephouse and Carter 2005).

We take this insight as our theoretical starting point and adopt an exploratory approach. In Study 3, we return to the Balocco-Ferragni case to examine whether media sentiment is more negative toward the influencer or the company. In Study 4, we investigate which factors influence journalists' decisions to focus blame on either the company or the influencer.

Study 3 (exploratory): Evidence from a real-world case with journalists' X data

The goal of this study is to examine how journalists report on company-influencer transgressions. Specifically, we check whether the sentiment expressed in journalists' tweets is more negative toward the influencer than toward the company, replicating the analyses conducted in Study 1 but focusing exclusively on tweets from media outlets (e.g., Antretter et al. 2019). In addition, we explore whether media sentiment shapes consumer sentiment by examining the relationship between journalists' and consumers' tweets.

Procedure Using the Pulsar platform, we collected tweets mentioning Ferragni or Balocco during the same periods examined in Study 1, restricting the dataset to accounts that explicitly identified themselves as journalistic sources. Specifically, we included accounts whose bios contained keywords such as “newspaper,” “journalist,” “news,” “giornale” (newspaper), “periodico” (periodical), “quotidiano” (daily newspaper), “giornalista” (journalist), “notizie” (news), “stampa” (press), “redazione” (editorial office), “testata” (news outlet), and “cronaca” (news reporting). We manually reviewed all selected accounts to verify that they indeed belonged to journalists or media outlets and removed any misclassified accounts. This process resulted in a dataset of 20,120 tweets. We found that journalists overwhelmingly focused on the influencer rather than the company, with 96% of tweets

referring to Ferragni. A one-sample proportion test indicates that the share focusing on the influencer (96%) is significantly greater than 50% ($z = 130.50, p < .001, h = 1.17$). This pattern suggests that, in company-influencer transgressions, media attention is disproportionately directed toward the influencer rather than the company. Next, we employed the DID approach used in Study 1 to analyze the sentiment of tweets related to both the influencer and the company.

Results We tested the effect of the influencer (vs. company) on journalists' tweet sentiment. Results from an OLS estimation indicate that sentiment toward the influencer is significantly more negative than sentiment toward the company ($b = -0.208, p < .001, d = 0.529$). This finding is robust to clustering errors at the user level ($b = -0.208, p < .001, d = 0.529$); controlling for gender, country, and number of followers ($b = -0.212, p < .001, d = 0.537$); including user-level fixed effects ($b = -0.187, p = .001, d = 0.475$); and matching on gender and country ($b = -0.198, p < .001, d = 0.503$)⁵. We then combined journalists' tweets with consumers' tweets to compare sentiment levels across groups. Using an OLS model, we interacted the influencer (vs. company) dummy with a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 for journalists' tweets and 0 for consumers' tweets. The results reveal a significant difference in the magnitude of sentiment reduction between journalists and consumers ($b = -0.111, p = .05, d = 0.282$), indicating that, relative to the pretreatment period, sentiment toward Ferragni declined more sharply in journalists' tweets than in consumers' tweets.

Moreover, to examine whether media sentiment influences consumer sentiment, we merged the consumer and journalist tweet datasets by date and focal actor (Ferragni or Balocco). We computed the average daily sentiment separately for each group and constructed a one-day lag of journalist sentiment. This approach allows us to examine

⁵ As in Study 1, we subsequently collected journalists' tweets that mentioned both Ferragni and Balocco, identifying 1,858 such tweets. Among these, 77.31% primarily referenced Ferragni as the focal actor. Consistent with the results of Study 1, in the treatment period, tweets that mentioned both actors but primarily focused on Ferragni were the most likely to express negative (vs. neutral) sentiment ($b = 1.884, p < .001$).

whether changes in media sentiment predict shifts in consumer sentiment on the following day. We then estimated a regression model including a three-way interaction among focal actor (Ferragni vs. Balocco), time period (pretreatment vs. treatment), and lagged journalist sentiment. The results reveal a significant effect for Ferragni in the treatment period ($b = 0.646, p < .001$), indicating that, after the transgression, journalists' sentiment significantly affects consumers' sentiment.

Discussion Our analyses indicate that, in response to company-influencer transgressions, media attention is disproportionately directed toward the influencer rather than the company. Moreover, media tweets directed toward the influencer are significantly more negative. Following the transgression, journalists' sentiment toward the influencer significantly affects consumers' sentiment. Taken together, these results provide initial evidence that media legitimacy may be a key driver of consumer responses.

In the following studies, we further examine the role of media legitimacy. In Study 4, we survey journalists using a fictional company-influencer transgression to assess whether the patterns observed in the Balocco-Ferragni case generalize beyond that specific context. In Studies 5a and 5b, we then shift our focus to consumers, investigating the mechanisms underlying their responses.

Study 4: Media legitimacy (journalists' perspective)

Participants and method We recruited 200 journalists and editors (56.50% female, 43% male, <1% other or did not disclose; $M_{\text{age}} = 37.29$ years, $SD = 11.92$) from the United States and United Kingdom through Prolific in exchange for monetary compensation. Because Prolific allows researchers to prescreen participants, we limited participation to individuals fluent in English and with professional experience in journalism, editing, or communications.

All participants read a scenario in which a fictional influencer and a fictional company were accused of making deceptive charitable claims within the context of a collaboration.

To ensure a controlled study environment and minimize potential confounding factors that could influence journalists' perceptions, we designed the scenario using neutral and unspecified attributes (see Web Appendix G, Panel A, for the full stimuli). Specifically: (1) we used fictional actors, Andy Smithson (an influencer) and GlamorGlow (an online company), to avoid prior associations; (2) we selected “Andy,” a gender-neutral name, to reduce potential gender bias; and (3) we omitted information about follower counts, company type, and size, to ensure that journalists’ responses were independent of such characteristics. The order in which the influencer and company were introduced was also randomized.

We asked participants to write a headline for a news article or post discussing the facts presented in the scenario (open-ended question: “What headline would you choose for an article or post based on the facts above?”). They then indicated who they would focus on more in their article (“Considering your knowledge in journalism, readers' interest, and your experience writing news articles, who would you cover more in your article?” ten-point bipolar scale; 1 = “company,” 10 = “influencer”; $M = 5.61$, $SD = 2.90$). Next, participants explained the reasoning behind their decision to focus more on either the company or the influencer (open-ended question: “Briefly explain your reasoning for choosing to focus more on Andy Smithson, the influencer, or GlamorGlow, the company, in your article”). We used an open-ended question format to clarify the motivations behind participants’ editorial choices and to gain insight into their assumptions about which aspects of the story were most likely to resonate with the audience. Finally, participants reported their years of experience in journalism or news production ($M = 4.92$, $SD = 6.44$), age, and gender. They were then debriefed, informed that the scenario was fictional, and thanked and compensated for their participation.

Results To examine whether journalists and editors would focus more on the influencer or the company when reporting on a transgression, we recoded responses as 1 if participants indicated they would focus more on the influencer (i.e., chose a value above the scale midpoint of 5.5) and 0 otherwise. A one-sample proportion test indicates that the share focusing on the influencer (110 of 200; or 55%) is marginally greater than 50% ($z = 1.41, p = .079$, one-tailed, $h = 0.10$). Results remained robust when controlling for age, gender, and years of experience in journalism. A logistic regression including age, gender (dummy coded), and years of experience revealed no significant effects of these covariates (all $ps > .10$). The model's adjusted probability of focusing on the influencer was 0.54 (SE = .04, 95% CI [0.47, 0.61]), closely matching the unadjusted proportion, indicating that controlling for these variables did not alter the results. The adjusted confidence interval included 0.50, consistent with the marginal result observed in the simple proportion test.

We then classified the sentiment of headlines as positive, negative, or neutral using VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary and sEntiment Reasoner). One hundred twenty-eight headlines (64%) were classified as negative. Among these negative headlines, 74 (57.81%) were written by participants who had indicated they would focus more on the influencer, whereas 54 (42.19%) were written by participants who had indicated they would focus more on the company. A one-sample proportion test confirms that 57.81% is significantly greater than 50% ($z = 1.77, p = .039$, one-tailed, $h = 0.16$). For robustness, we repeated the sentiment analysis using TextBlob. Eighty headlines (40%) were classified as negative. A one-sample proportion test again confirms that the proportion of negative headlines written by participants who had indicated they would focus more on the influencer (49, or 61.25%) is significantly higher than 50% ($z = 2.01, p = .044, h = 0.23$).

To analyze the open-ended rationales provided by participants, we used OpenAI GPT-5.1 and prompted it to perform latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA), a topic model that

represents a corpus of documents as a random mixture of latent topics (Blei, Ng, and Jordan 2003). The model generated topic clusters and associated top terms separately for the influencer-focused (110) and company-focused (90) subsets of responses. However, as is common in unsupervised topic modeling, the top words in each topic (e.g., focus, company, influencer, etc.) were at times semantically generic, limiting their interpretability. Therefore, rather than relying solely on the algorithmic output, we adopted a hybrid approach (Romero et al. 2024). Specifically, we used LDA to cluster responses and identify coherent groups of rationales and then performed manual thematic coding of the quotes from each cluster. This approach allowed us to meaningfully label and interpret the topics based on their substantive content. For journalists who focused on the influencer, LDA identified five main topics, which we interpreted as identification (Topics 1 and 2), journalists' self-serving motives (Topic 3), accountability (Topic 4), and gloating (Topic 5). Table 3 contains the detected topics, the top 15 words identified by LDA, our interpretations, and illustrative quotes.

----- Insert Table 3 about here -----

Topics 1 (46 responses, 41.8%) and 2 (13 responses, 11.8%), both related to *identification*, suggest that although responsibility is shared between the company and the influencer, consumers are more likely to identify with the individual than with the organization. According to Aron, Aron, and Smollan (1992), people often develop a sense of closeness and personal relevance to public figures. However, when they read about an influencer's transgression, the discomfort created by this identification may lead them to distance themselves. Consistent with Social Identity Theory, "this dissonance creates conflict with one's self-image to a point that the individual has no choice but to disassociate" (Anaza et al. 2021, p. 117). Topic 3 (18 responses, 16.4%), *journalists' self-serving motives* (Reeder et al. 2005), highlights the human-interest aspect of the transgression, emphasizing individual stories and personal narratives rather than the broader context of the event. Journalists appear

to believe that focusing on people (i.e., Andy Smithson) is more effective in attracting readers' attention and interest. Topic 4 (22 responses, 20%), *accountability*, focuses on influencers' roles in marketing campaigns and how journalists view their personal experiences and decisions as integral to instances of fraud. This topic suggests that journalists attribute responsibility to influencers in ways that align with relational aspects of accountability. According to Painter-Morland (2006), accountability is not merely a matter of causal, individual responsibility but also involves relational responsiveness that reflects stakeholders' expectations and perceptions. In this context, journalists suggest that consumers may perceive influencers as the key decision-makers in what is communicated to their followers, making their actions more newsworthy than the company's. Topic 5 (11 responses, 10%), *gloating*, addresses the public perception of influencers versus companies, particularly in relation to their downfalls. This topic is best explained through the concept of *schadenfreude* (Moisieiev, Dimitriu, and Jain 2020), which captures journalists' portrayals of influencer failures in ways that appeal to audiences' enjoyment of public figures facing consequences.

For completeness, we also analyzed the responses from the smaller number of journalists who chose to focus on the company to provide a more balanced account. In contrast to the richer thematic structure emerging from influencer-focused responses, the LDA applied to company-focused responses yielded only two topics, which we interpreted as (1) systemic corporate deception, and (2) financial and organizational resource advantage. Topic 1 (29 responses, 32.2%), *systemic corporate deception*, reflects a broader perception of unethical corporate behavior. Rather than viewing the company's actions as an isolated case, several participants framed them as symptomatic of widespread industry practices. Topic 2 (61 responses, 67.8%), *financial and organizational resource advantage*, aligns with our original theoretical reasoning and suggests that companies, by virtue of their greater financial

power and operational capacity, are expected to assume more responsibility for managing the collaboration.

Post-hoc validation study We then conducted a post-hoc validation study to evaluate the accuracy and interpretive validity of the topics generated in the LDA analysis and our subsequent interpretations of journalists' rationales for focusing on the influencer. A total of 100 participants were recruited through Prolific in exchange for a small monetary compensation. Ninety participants passed the attention check ($M_{\text{age}} = 43$ years, $SD = 13.44$; 54.4% female) and were included in the analyses. Participants were shown the five topics, each presented individually in randomized order. Every topic was accompanied by: (a) a title summarizing the interpretation, (b) a brief explanation of what the topic represented, (c) the top words appearing in journalists' rationales associated with that topic, and (d) one or more example excerpts illustrating how journalists expressed that reasoning.

After reading each topic description, participants rated the extent to which they agreed that the interpretation accurately captured what journalists were expressing in their responses. Responses were provided on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = "strongly disagree" and 7 = "strongly agree"). To assess whether participants agreed that each topic interpretation accurately represented journalists' reasoning, we conducted a series of one-sample *t*-tests comparing mean agreement ratings for each topic against the neutral midpoint of 4 on the seven-point scale. Participants rated Topic 1 (Identification) significantly above the midpoint ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 1.28$, $t(89) = 10.69$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.13$), indicating strong agreement that this interpretation reflected journalists' reasoning. Similarly, Topic 2 (Identification) was rated as highly accurate ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 1.25$, $t(89) = 11.24$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.18$). Topic 3 (Journalists' Self-Serving Motives) also received substantial support ($M = 6.37$, $SD = 1.62$, $t(89) = 13.82$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.46$). Agreement ratings for Topic 4 (Accountability) were likewise high ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.77$, $t(89) = 3.03$, $p = .003$, $d = 0.32$), reflecting strong endorsement of this

interpretation. Finally, Topic 5 (Gloating) was rated significantly above the neutral point ($M = 5.76$, $SD = 1.36$, $t(89) = 12.25$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.29$).

Taken together, these results indicate that participants consistently agreed with our interpretations of the LDA-derived topics. All mean agreement ratings were significantly greater than the scale midpoint, supporting the validity of the proposed topic labels as accurate representations of journalists' reasoning. We note that including participants who failed the attention check produced the same overall pattern of results.

Finally, we conducted an expert validation. Two independent researchers were provided with the 110 raw rationales, without topic labels or descriptive summaries, and were asked to generate their own thematic interpretations. Their interpretations closely aligned with ours (see Web Appendix G, Panel B, for additional details).

Discussion Study 4 shows that journalists tend to focus more on influencers (vs. companies) when reporting on a company-influencer transgression and that this coverage is more negative in tone. Consequently, media scrutiny primarily targets influencers, leading to a reduction in their media legitimacy. In the following studies, we further examine the role of media legitimacy in shaping consumer responses. In Web Appendix G, Panel C, we report an additional study with a new sample of experienced journalists further examining the mechanisms underlying media focus.

Study 5a: Media legitimacy as determinant of consumer responses

In this experimental study, we causally test the effect of media legitimacy on consumer responses. We manipulate the loss of media legitimacy by varying the focal target of the media narrative, either the influencer or the company, and examine its downstream effects on consumer attitudes toward both parties involved in the transgression. This approach is theoretically grounded in the notion that media legitimacy is conferred through visibility,

framing, and the attribution of responsibility: when negative media coverage disproportionately centres on one actor, that actor experiences a greater erosion of legitimacy in the public eye (Deepphouse 1996). This study was preregistered on aspredicted.org (<https://aspredicted.org/kx93-wx9q.pdf>).

Participants and method We recruited participants from the United States ($N = 298$; 53.69% female, 42.95% male, <4% other or did not disclose; $M_{\text{age}} = 38.10$ years, $SD = 12.64$) through Prolific in exchange for monetary compensation. Individuals who had participated in earlier studies within this project were excluded. Participants were informed that they would be reading some information about a company-influencer transgression: “Here are some more media headlines in the news regarding the fraud of the collaboration between the influencer Andy Smithson [the company GlamorGlow] and the company GlamorGlow [the influencer Andy Smithson].” We manipulated the loss of media legitimacy by creating stimuli informed by the headlines provided by journalists in Study 4 (see Web Appendix H, Panel A, for the full stimuli). The manipulation varied whether the article headlines focused on the influencer versus the company. Specifically, we drew inspiration from the headlines journalists in Study 4 had written about the transgression and slightly adapted them for use in this experiment. This approach ensured ecological validity, as the materials were grounded in authentic journalistic expressions. Importantly, the headlines were identical across conditions in wording, tone, and severity; the only element that varied was the focal actor mentioned (i.e., the company vs. the influencer). This design ensured that any observed effects could not be attributed to differences in harshness or framing intensity across conditions. After reading the headlines, participants indicated, in random order, their attitudes toward the influencer and toward the company using the same scale as in Study 2a ($\alpha_{\text{influencer}} = .97$; $M_{\text{influencer}} = 2.07$, $SD = 1.20$, eigenvalue = 3.63; $\alpha_{\text{company}} = .98$; $M_{\text{company}} = 2.28$, $SD = 1.32$, eigenvalue = 3.73). Participants then reported their age and gender. Finally, they were thanked and compensated

for their time and informed that the news content was fictitious and used solely for research purposes.

Results We tested the effect of loss of media legitimacy using a one-way ANOVA, with the focus of media coverage as the independent variable and consumer attitudes as the dependent variable. These attitudes served as proxies for consumer responses. We found a significant effect of the influencer's loss of media legitimacy (1 = influencer, 0 = company) on consumer attitudes toward the influencer ($M_{\text{influencer-focus influencer}} = 1.89$ vs. $M_{\text{influencer-focus company}} = 2.25$; $F(1, 296) = 7.08, p = .008, \eta^2 = .02$). We then tested the same effect on consumer attitudes toward the company and found no significant effect ($M_{\text{company-focus company}} = 2.18$ vs. $M_{\text{company-focus influencer}} = 2.39$; $F(1, 296) = 1.93, p = .17, \eta^2 = .006$). We further demonstrated the robustness of this effect by replicating it using a different transgression (see Web Appendix H, Panel B) and by manipulating both the severity of media legitimacy loss (Panel C) and influencer size (macro vs. nano; Panel D). The same pattern of results emerged across all extensions.

Discussion Overall, the findings of Study 5a replicate those of Study 3 and support our prediction that consumers respond more harshly to the influencer when media legitimacy is lost, an effect that, we note, does not emerge for companies. In Study 5b, we examine the mechanisms underlying this effect and explore whether consumers recognize journalists' self-serving motives.

Study 5b: Evidence on the mechanism

Having established the relationship between loss of media legitimacy and consumer responses to the influencer, in this study we examine potential mediators that may explain this effect. Specifically, using a between-subject design, we test the four mechanisms identified through the text analysis of journalists' responses in Study 4: identification,

journalists' self-serving motives, accountability, and gloating. This study was preregistered on aspredicted.org (<https://aspredicted.org/thsn-nt87.pdf>).

Participants and method We recruited 301 participants (57.14% female, 41.20% male, 1.66% other or did not disclose; $M_{\text{age}} = 40.48$ years, $SD = 13.13$) through Prolific in exchange for monetary compensation. All participants were residents of the United States and fluent in English. Individuals who had participated in any of our previous studies were excluded *a priori*.

Participants were informed that they would be reading information about a company-influencer transgression. Specifically, they were told: "Here are some more media headlines on the news regarding the fraud of the collaboration between the influencer Sammy Anderson [the company LabOS] and the company LabOS [the influencer Sammy Anderson]." As in Study 5a, we manipulated the loss of media legitimacy (see Web Appendix I for the full stimuli) by varying whether the headlines focused on the influencer versus the company. As before, the headlines were identical across conditions in wording, tone, and severity; the only element that varied was the focal actor mentioned. After reading the headlines, participants indicated their attitudes toward either the influencer or the company (same scale as in Study 2a), depending on the condition to which they had been assigned. Those randomly assigned to the influencer-loss-of-media-legitimacy condition evaluated the influencer, whereas those randomly assigned to the company-loss-of-media-legitimacy condition evaluated the company ($\alpha = .96$; $M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.51$; eigenvalue = 3.59).

Next, participants answered questions assessing the four mechanisms: (1) journalists' self-serving motives: "The media is motivated more by selfish interests than by objective responsibilities" and "The media focuses on attracting readers rather than following ethical principles," adapted from Reeder et al. (2005; $\alpha = .78$; $M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.74$; eigenvalue = 1.64), (2) accountability: "What [influencers/companies] do is noticed by others in their

network,"⁶ "If [influencers/companies] make a mistake, they will be caught," and "They are constantly watched to see if they follow correct policies and procedures," adapted from Painter-Morland (2006; $\alpha = .78$; $M = 4.80$, $SD = 1.25$; eigenvalue = 1.65), and (3) gloating: Regarding the misfortune of the transgressor, "I feel joyful," "I feel glad," "I feel happy," and "I feel satisfied," adapted from Moisieiev, Dimitriu, and Jain (2020; $\alpha = .95$; $M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.81$; eigenvalue = 3.47). To measure (4) identification ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.87$) we adopted the procedure from Aron, Aron, and Smollan (1992), in which participants selected the level of overlap between their identity and that of the influencer or company using a visual inclusion-of-other-in-self (IOS) scale. The question was presented as follows: "We sometimes strongly identify with an influencer (company). This occurs when we perceive a great amount of overlap between our ideas about who we are as a person and what we stand for (i.e., our self-image) and about who this influencer (company) is and what they stand for (i.e., their image). Imagine that the circle on the left represents your own personal identity, and the circle on the right represents the influencer's (company's) identity. Please indicate which case (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, or H) best describes the level of overlap between your identity and the influencer's (company's) identity." Participants then reported their age and gender. Finally, they were thanked for their time and informed that the news content was fictitious and used solely for research purposes.

Results We ran a parallel mediation model to test the competing mechanisms, specifying influencer's (vs. company's) loss of media legitimacy (1 = influencer's loss of media legitimacy, 0 = company's loss of media legitimacy) as the independent variable, consumer response (i.e., attitude) as the dependent variable, and journalists' self-serving motives, accountability, gloating, and identification as parallel mediators (Model 4, 10,000 resamples

⁶ This item was removed from the main analysis as it explained less than 25% of the variance in the construct. However, the results of Study 5b remain consistent when including this item in the main measure of accountability or when treating it as a distinct construct.

[Hayes 2018]). The reduced media legitimacy of the influencer (vs. company) has a negative and significant effect on identification ($b = -.55$, $t = -2.60$, $p = .010$, $d = -0.30$), and identification has a positive and significant effect on attitude ($b = .29$, $t = 6.49$, $p < .001$), leading to a significant indirect negative effect. Thus, identification emerged as an underlying mechanism ($ab = -.16$, $SE = .07$, $95\% \text{ CI} = [-.30, -.04]$). The independent variable has no effect on journalists' self-serving motives ($b = .20$, $t = 1.02$, $p = .31$, $d = 0.12$), accountability ($b = .24$, $t = 1.67$, $p = .10$, $d = 0.19$), or gloating ($b = .24$, $t = 1.15$, $p = .25$, $d = 0.13$). Overall, we find no significant indirect effect of influencer's (vs. company's) loss of media legitimacy on attitudes through journalists' self-serving motives ($ab = .01$, $SE = .01$, $95\% \text{ CI} = [-.02, .04]$), accountability ($ab = .02$, $SE = .02$, $95\% \text{ CI} = [-.02, .06]$), or gloating ($ab = .04$, $SE = .04$, $95\% \text{ CI} = [-.03, .13]$). The overall direct effect was also not significant ($b = .04$, $SE = .16$, $t = .25$, $p = .80$). Figure 1 illustrates the results of the parallel mediation model.

----- Insert Figure 1 about here -----

Discussion The findings of Study 5b show that loss of media legitimacy significantly affects consumers' perceptions of the influencer by reducing their identification with them. This weakened identification, in turn, leads to more negative attitudes toward the influencer. Moreover, this study rules out alternative explanations, namely, journalists' self-serving motives, accountability, and gloating. In Studies 6a and 6b, we examine three distinct remedial strategies employed by influencers and show how these strategies can help restore media legitimacy and improve consumer responses following a transgression.

Study 6: Influencer interventions to regain media legitimacy and improve consumer responses

In Studies 6a and 6b, we examine how three remedial strategies, each differing in the degree of media intermediation involved in an influencer's response to a company-influencer

transgression, affect media legitimacy (Study 6a) and, in turn, downstream consumer responses (Study 6b). We selected these three intervention strategies because they capture the primary response options available to influencers in real-world crises. Importantly, they vary systematically along a single dimension: the extent to which the influencer can retain control over the narrative. The first strategy involves a direct response issued on the influencer's own social media platforms, without any involvement from the media. This approach allows the influencer to retain complete control over the content, tone, and framing of the message. It is commonly employed in the immediate aftermath of a scandal, as it enables the influencer to address followers directly and attempt to restore trust on their own terms. The second strategy entails participating in an interview with a favorable or supportive journalist, representing a moderate level of media intermediation. Here, the influencer's message is mediated through the media but within a cooperative context, where the journalist largely legitimizes the influencer's account and helps convey sincerity and credibility. Real-world examples include Chiara Ferragni's appearance on the TV talk show *Che Tempo Che Fa* (What's the weather like), as well as British influencer Molly-Mae Hague's interview and documentary in which she contextualized and addressed criticism surrounding earlier remarks that had been widely perceived as elitist. The third strategy involves participating in an interview with a critical journalist, representing a high level of media intermediation. In this format, the influencer's response is subject to probing questions, reinterpretation, and potential reframing by a skeptical media actor, thereby reducing the influencer's control over the narrative and heightening the salience of responsibility and accountability. For instance, Andrew Tate, a controversial influencer known, among others, for his misogynistic remarks, exemplified this strategy through his critical, journalist-led interviews with Piers Morgan on *Piers Morgan Uncensored*.

By holding the substantive response constant and varying only the degree of media intermediation, these three interventions allow us to cleanly test how increasing external mediation influences journalists' evaluations of the influencer (i.e., the extent to which they regain media legitimacy; Study 6a) and, subsequently, consumer perceptions and responses toward the influencer (Study 6b).

Study 6a: Regaining media legitimacy

Participants and method We recruited 300 participants (61.33% female, 37.67% male, 1% other or did not disclose; $M_{\text{age}} = 33.08$ years, $SD = 10.12$) through Prolific. Participants were required to have professional experience in journalism and fluency in English but were not restricted to any specific geographic region. They completed an online study in exchange for monetary compensation.

All participants read a scenario describing a collaboration between a fictional influencer and a fictional company that were accused of making deceptive charitable claims. To ensure a controlled environment and minimize potential confounds that might influence journalists' perceptions, we used fictional actors Sam Collins, an influencer, and Velvee, an online company. We intentionally selected the name Sam as a gender-neutral name (see Web Appendix J for the full stimuli). This study was preregistered on aspredicted.org (<https://aspredicted.org/jzcq-s7hx.pdf>). Journalists were informed that their task was to write a short news article based on the following information: "You are about to read a news report about a recent development involving an influencer-company transgression. Your task is to write a short news article covering this event. Focus on the influencer's decision and how they are choosing to respond to the situation. The background information provided is to give context, but your article should primarily highlight the influencer's actions and the implications of their response. Now, read the news report carefully before writing your

article.” Participants were randomly allocated to one of three conditions: the influencer responded through (1) a social media story directed at followers, (2) an interview with a favorable journalist, or (3) an interview with a critical journalist. We selected these interventions to capture varying degrees of media intermediation and narrative control in an influencer’s crisis response. We also asked participants to provide a headline for their article (open-ended question: “What headline would you choose for an article focusing on the way the influencer has chosen to respond to the past controversy?”) and to rate how critical they would be toward the influencer’s actions (ten-point bipolar scale; 1 = “not at all critical” and 10 = “very critical”). This item was reverse-coded as a proxy for media legitimacy, such that higher values indicated greater media legitimacy ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 2.10$). Participants also reported their years of experience in journalism ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 5.35$), age, and gender. Finally, we debriefed participants, clarified that the scenario was fictional, and compensated them for their participation. We excluded those who failed an attention check identifying the influencer’s intervention type ($N = 75$); results remained consistent when they were included.

Results We tested the effect of the intervention type on media legitimacy using a one-way ANOVA, with the intervention type (i.e., social media story, interview with a critical journalist, or interview with a favorable journalist) as the independent variable and media legitimacy as the dependent variable ($F(2, 222) = 3.45$, $p = .034$, $\eta^2 = .03$). We regressed media legitimacy on the intervention, using the interview with a critical journalist as the baseline. Journalists expressed significantly greater willingness to legitimize the influencer in the critical journalist condition compared to the favorable journalist condition ($b_{\text{favorable vs. critical}} = -.74$, $SE = .35$, $t = -2.12$, $p = .035$, $d = 0.36$). Similarly, journalists expressed a significantly greater willingness to legitimize the influencer in the critical journalist condition compared to the social media story condition ($b_{\text{story vs. critical}} = -.78$, $SE = .32$, $t = -2.40$, $p = .017$, $d = 0.38$; see Figure 2).

----- Insert Figure 2 about here -----

Discussion Overall, the results of Study 6a show that journalists are more willing to restore the media legitimacy of influencers when the influencer chooses to respond by placing themselves under the scrutiny of a journalist who has been typically critical toward them.

Study 6b: Improving consumer responses

Participants and method We recruited 361 participants (64.27% female, 35.18% male, <1% other or not disclosing, $M_{age} = 39.87$ years, $SD = 13.66$) through Prolific in the United States and United Kingdom. Participants were required to be fluent in English and had not participated in any of our previous studies. They completed an online study in exchange for monetary compensation. All participants read a scenario describing a collaboration between a fictional influencer and a fictional company accused of making deceptive charitable claims (see Web Appendix K, Panel A, for the full stimuli). This study was preregistered on [aspredicted.org](https://aspredicted.org/66x4-v6mx.pdf) (<https://aspredicted.org/66x4-v6mx.pdf>).

Participants were informed that they would read an article based on information we provided in Study 6a. They were then randomly assigned to one of the same three intervention conditions as in Study 6a. In addition to the text used previously, we included three media headlines corresponding to the influencer's intervention. To enhance ecological validity, we constructed these headlines based on those written by journalists in Study 6a. Specifically, we compiled all titles generated in each intervention condition and used OpenAI's GPT-4o to suggest three representative headlines per condition. Participants then read the headlines of the news articles or posts discussing the event.⁷ After reading the materials, participants reported their responses to the influencer, with attitudes serving as a

⁷ We acknowledge that the headlines generated from those proposed by journalists in Study 6a, while enhancing realism, also slightly varied in style across the three conditions, potentially introducing a confound. However, we addressed this concern in a replication study (see Web Appendix K, Panel B), in which we standardized the wording of the headlines across conditions. The results remain unchanged.

proxy for consumer responses (scale from Study 2a; $\alpha = .95$; $M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.30$; eigenvalue = 3.46). Finally, participants reported their age and gender. We then thanked them, debriefed that the scenario was fictional, and compensated them for their participation. Participants who failed the attention check regarding the influencer's intervention type were excluded ($N = 59$); results remained consistent when they were included.

Results We tested the effect of the intervention type on consumer responses using a one-way ANOVA with the type of intervention (i.e., social media story, interview with a critical journalist, or interview with a favorable journalist) as the independent variable and attitudes as the dependent variable ($F(2, 299) = 3.30$, $p = .038$, $\eta^2 = .022$). We regressed consumer responses on the intervention, using the critical journalist interview as the baseline.

Participants expressed significantly more positive attitudes toward the influencer in the critical journalist condition than in the social media story condition ($b_{\text{story vs. critical}} = -.41$, $SE = .17$, $t = -2.43$, $p = .016$, $d = 0.33$). Attitudes in the favorable journalist condition did not differ significantly from either the critical journalist condition ($b_{\text{favorable vs. critical}} = -.08$, $SE = .18$, $t = -.44$, $p = .66$, $d = 0.06$) or social media story condition, although the latter comparison was marginal ($b_{\text{story vs. favorable}} = -.33$, $SE = .18$, $t = -1.89$, $p = .06$, $d = 0.27$; see Figure 3).

----- Insert Figure 3 about here -----

Discussion Consumer responses are more positive when the influencer intervenes through an interview with a critical journalist. Even an interview with a favorable journalist partially restores positive consumer evaluations, whereas directly addressing followers on social media is the least effective strategy. These findings further underscore the importance of media legitimacy in shaping consumer responses to influencers involved in company-influencer transgressions.

General discussion

This research examines consumer responses to company-influencer transgressions, a phenomenon that has become increasingly common with the rapid rise of company-influencer collaborations. Across studies using both real-world cases and controlled fictional scenarios, our findings consistently show that influencers tend to bear the brunt of consumer backlash when such transgressions occur.

We demonstrate that, in company-influencer transgressions, the media tends to scrutinize influencers, subjecting them to harsher criticism than the companies involved. This loss of media legitimacy, in turn, leads consumers to respond more negatively toward influencers. We argue that this occurs because consumers identify more strongly with influencers than with companies; when influencers are implicated in a transgression, consumers distance themselves to protect their self-image.

Finally, we examine how influencers can mitigate this loss of media legitimacy. Our findings show that journalists are less disparaging of influencers who, after a transgression, choose to be interviewed by a media outlet that has previously been critical of them, rather than by a favorable outlet or by addressing the issue solely on their own social media channels. This remedial strategy also improves consumer responses, suggesting that engaging directly with critical media can help soften consumer backlash. Figure 4 presents a conceptual framework summarizing our empirical findings (Golder et al. 2023).

----- Insert Figure 4 about here -----

Our research contributes to the literature in several important ways. First, whereas prior work on transgressions has focused primarily on single-actor transgressions (see e.g., von Mettenheim and Wiedmann 2023), this study represents, to the best of our knowledge, the first systematic effort to examine the consequences of multi-actor transgressions, in which responsibility attribution is often ambiguous. We show that, in company-influencer transgressions, the influencer tends to face the strongest negative response. Moreover,

following an empirics-first approach (Golder et al. 2023), we examine these transgressions through both a multimethod approach (field study, experiments, surveys, and text analysis) and a multi-perspective approach that integrates insights from both media and consumers. Doing so enables a more holistic understanding of consumer responses to such transgressions. By integrating real-world data from an actual company-influencer transgression with evidence from controlled experiments involving fictional scenarios, we capture responses from both consumers and the media.

Second, we contribute to the influencer marketing literature. Prior research has predominantly highlighted the positive aspects of influencer marketing, emphasizing how influencer characteristics and content drive consumer engagement (see e.g., Cascio Rizzo et al. 2024; Valsesia, Proserpio, and Nunes 2020) and how brands can strategically optimize collaborations with influencers (see e.g., Lanz et al. 2024; Tian, Dew, and Iyengar 2024). Our findings extend this literature by highlighting the challenges faced by influencers. In company-influencer transgressions, influencers experience heightened negative consequences, revealing the disproportionate reputational burden they bear relative to companies.

Finally, we advance research on media impact. Prior work, including news value theory (see e.g., Molyneux 2015; Stähler and Fischer 2020), has explored how *media coverage* shapes public reactions. Building on this literature, our findings reveal that, in company-influencer transgressions, media attention disproportionately centers on influencers rather than on companies. This focus amplifies the loss of media legitimacy for influencers, which in turn negatively shapes consumer perceptions of them but not of the companies involved. The media's tendency to scrutinize influencers more harshly thus heightens their reputational vulnerability and exposure to public backlash.

This research also offers actionable managerial implications for both companies and influencers involved in company-influencer transgressions. Companies must recognize the media's tendency to disproportionately focus on influencers following transgressions. Although this focus can provide temporary reputational shielding, it also requires careful management of the collaboration. Companies can strategically leverage this media attention to emphasize their corrective actions, while avoiding overexposure of the brand. Because the loss of media legitimacy does not significantly affect consumer responses toward companies, firms retain greater control over their reputational narratives and messaging. However, this should not be misinterpreted as an opportunity to evade accountability. Instead, companies should build collaborations grounded in shared values, implement thorough vetting processes, and establish ongoing monitoring, clear contractual safeguards, and proactive crisis management plans to mitigate the risks associated with influencer misconduct.

For influencers, the risks associated with brand collaborations are particularly pronounced. While securing multiple partnerships can enhance visibility and financial success, it also increases exposure to potential transgressions, whether stemming from their own actions or those of the brands they endorse. Our findings indicate that when transgressions occur, media coverage disproportionately targets influencers, amplifying their reputational vulnerability and leading to more negative consumer responses.

To mitigate these risks, influencers should carefully evaluate potential collaborations, recognizing the unequal distribution of media scrutiny. Effective partnerships require value alignment, shared accountability, and transparency between influencers and companies. By adopting a proactive approach, influencers can reduce the likelihood of becoming scapegoats and cultivate more sustainable, trust-based collaborations.

Our findings also highlight strategies for mitigating the loss of media legitimacy following a transgression. Specifically, journalists respond more favorably to influencers

who, after a transgression, choose to engage with critical media outlets rather than relying solely on supportive platforms or their own channels. This form of remedial strategy not only restores media legitimacy but also positively influences consumer responses, suggesting that direct engagement with critical media can help reduce consumer backlash (see Web Appendix L for a summary).

Limitations and future research directions

Despite the rigor of our studies and our effort to provide a holistic understanding of consumer responses to company-influencer transgressions, some limitations warrant consideration. We carefully designed our methodology to mitigate these challenges, yet some constraints remain.

First, our real-world case study focuses on a specific company-influencer transgression within the Italian context. To address this limitation, we conducted experimental studies using fictional actors and transgressions with consumers and journalists from other countries, ensuring a cleaner design free from contextual biases. Nevertheless, cultural and transgression-specific factors may still influence responses in Study 1 and Study 3.

Second, although we employed a robust DID estimation with several robustness checks to strengthen causal inference, the real-world findings remain correlational. Real-world data provide valuable insights into consumer behavior in natural settings, but they also introduce complexities that make isolating causal mechanisms challenging.

Third, we identified three potential determinants of consumer responses toward influencers (vs. companies): prominence, financial resource advantage, and media legitimacy. While we integrated relevant theoretical perspectives from within and beyond marketing, other frameworks may reveal additional determinants not captured here.

Fourth, our research focuses on company-influencer transgressions where responsibility attribution is ambiguous. In cases where culpability is unequivocally attributed to either the company or the influencer, consumer responses may follow established patterns from prior research on brand (see e.g., Khamitov, Grégoire, and Suri 2020) or influencer (see e.g., von Mettenheim and Wiedmann 2023) transgressions.

Fifth, our examination of remedial strategies focuses on how influencers communicate (i.e., through critical/favorable media or their own social media), rather than on what they communicate. Future research could examine message content, tone, or framing as additional factors shaping media and consumer responses.

Sixth, a limitation of this research is that the journalist samples in Studies 4 and 6a do not always have extensive professional experience. Although robustness checks using more experienced subsamples yield similar results, future research could examine more senior journalist populations. Moreover, in Study 4, although we implemented multiple safeguards during the coding process, the independent validation was conducted as an additional verification check after the primary coding phase rather than being designed as a standalone procedure from the outset. Future research could incorporate independent validation prospectively as part of the initial study design to further strengthen confidence in the reliability of open-ended coding.

Seventh, other antecedents may influence how the media responds to multi-actor transgressions. Although we ruled out the role of actors' prior reputation (high vs. low) in an additional study, not reported here in the interest of brevity, future research could explore other contextual and relational factors that fall outside the scope of the present investigation. For example, while our studies focus on situations in which the transgression is factual and verified, an important extension would be to examine cases where information about the transgression is later revealed to be false. In such contexts, misinformation or fake news

could shape journalists' framing decisions, influence the level of skepticism directed toward different actors, and alter consumers' attributions of responsibility. Investigating how media intermediation functions under conditions of informational uncertainty thus represents a promising direction for future research. Additionally, future work could investigate how local versus domestic media contexts (Davvetas, Ulqinaku, and Katsikeas 2024) and industry-specific norms moderate media responses to multi-actor transgressions. Similarly, factors such as consumers' loyalty toward the influencer could shape responses and affect how blame is allocated. Future research could examine loyalty as a potential boundary condition, with the expectation that high (vs. low) loyalty may mitigate (vs. enhance) negative consumer responses.

Finally, beyond media and consumers, other key institutional actors, such as regulators and oversight bodies (e.g., the Food & Drug Administration, the Federal Trade Commission, or similar national authorities), also play a critical role in shaping public discourse and accountability following company-influencer transgressions. Future research could investigate how the involvement or absence of these regulatory entities influences media coverage, public trust, and the allocation of responsibility across the company-influencer dyad. Web Appendix M summarizes key opportunities for extending this research stream and advancing understanding of company-influencer transgressions.

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Figure 1. Results of parallel mediation

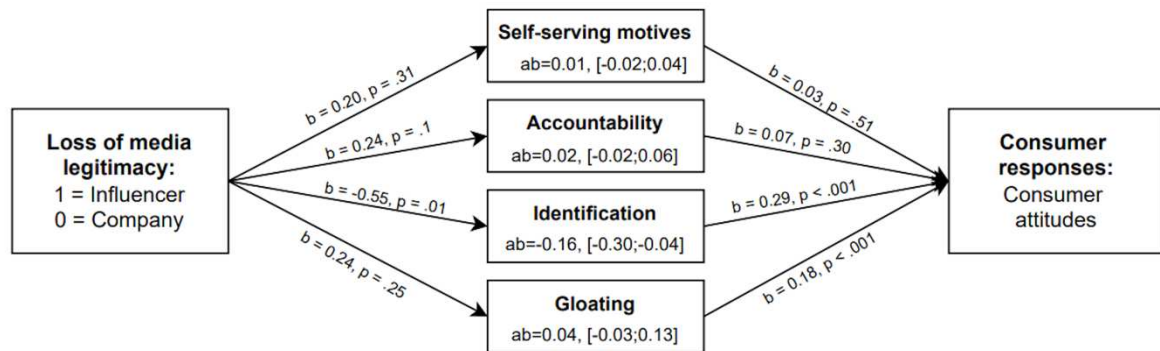


Figure 2. Media legitimacy by intervention

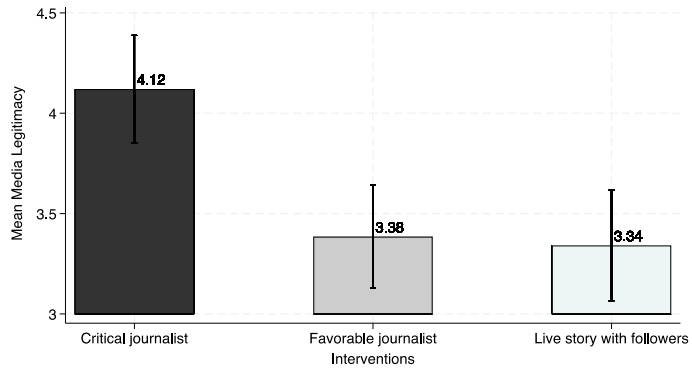


Figure 3. Consumer responses by intervention

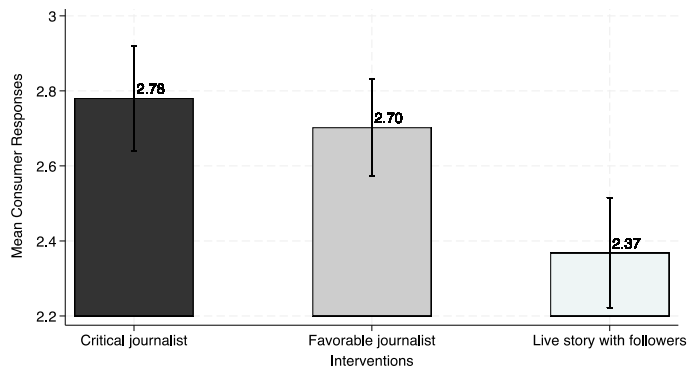


Figure 4. Conceptual framework

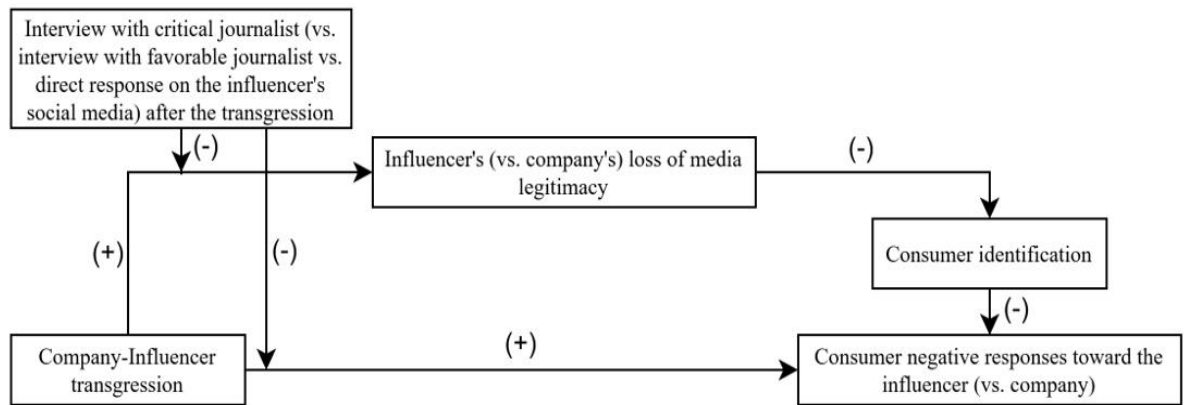


Table 1. Overview of studies

<i>Sample</i>	<i>Methodology</i>	<i>Aim</i>	<i>Conceptual model contribution</i>
Study 1			
N = 80,314 tweets mentioning Ferragni or Balocco Platform: X; Jan-Oct 2022; Dec 2023 to Jul 2024	DID and OLS	Investigate consumer responses to a real-world company-influencer transgression	
Studies 2a and 2b			
N = 401 Ps Country: USA Platform: Prolific Gender: 52.4% F Age: M = 41.28, SD = 13.86	2 × 2 between-subjects design manipulating influencer prominence (high vs. low) and company prominence (high vs. low)	Causally test whether actor prominence explains the asymmetric consumer responses observed in Study 1	
N = 301 Ps Country: USA Platform: Prolific Gender: 69.1% F Age: M = 39.93, SD = 12.50	Between-subjects experiment (3 conditions) manipulating influencer financial resource advantage, company financial resource advantage, control	Causally test whether financial resource advantage shapes consumer attitudes toward the influencer and the company as a potential explanation for Study 1	
Study 3			
N = 20,120 tweets from media outlets and journalists mentioning Ferragni or Balocco Platform: X; Jan-Oct 2022; Dec 2023 to Jul 2024	DID and OLS	Analyse the role of the media in response to transgressions and whether its sentiment is more negative toward influencers	
Study 4			
N = 200 journalists and editors Country: USA, UK Platform: Prolific Gender: 56.5% F Age: M = 37.29, SD = 11.92	Survey; LDA to identify drivers behind participants' focus on either the influencer or the company	Understand whether and why journalists and editors would focus more on the influencer or on the company when reporting on a transgression	

Study 5a	Media legitimacy as determinant of consumer responses	Causally test the effect of loss of media legitimacy on consumer responses	
N = 298 Ps Country: USA Platform: Prolific Gender: 53.69% F Age: M = 38.10, SD = 12.64	Between-subject experimental design: manipulation of the influencer's (vs. company's) loss of media legitimacy		
Study 5b	Evidence on the mechanism	Investigate a series of potential mediators that can explain the relationship between loss of media legitimacy and consumer responses	
N = 301 Ps Country: USA Platform: Prolific Gender: 57.14% F Age: M = 40.48, SD = 13.13	Between-subject experimental design: manipulation of the influencer's (vs. company's) loss of media legitimacy		
Study 6a	Regaining media legitimacy	Explore remedial strategies employed by influencers and show their effect on media legitimacy following a transgression	
N = 300 journalists and editors (final sample N = 225) Country: no restriction Platform: Prolific Gender: 61.33% F Age: M = 33.08, SD = 10.12	Between-subject experimental design: manipulation of the remedial strategy		
Study 6b	Improving consumer responses	Explore remedial strategies employed by influencers and show their effect on consumer responses following a transgression	
N = 361 Ps (final sample N = 302) Country: USA, UK Platform: Prolific Gender: 64.27% F Age: M = 39.87, SD = 13.66	Between-subject experimental design: manipulation of the remedial strategy		

Table 2. Study 1 results

Variables DV = Tweet Sentiment	Model 1: OLS	Model 2: Clustered error at user level	Model 3: Covariates at user level	Model 4: Fixed effects at user level
Influencer (vs. company)	.0853 (.0205) .000	.0853 (.0283) .003	.0984 (.0264) .000	.1458 (.0376) .000
Post	-.0638 (.0249) .010	-.0638 (.0310) .040	-.0421 (.0338) .213	.0444 (.0421) .291
Influencer × post	-.0974 (.0251) .000	-.0974 (.0314) .002	-.1195 (.0341) .000	-.1433 (.0423) .001
Gender				
Male vs. female			-.0063 (.0048) .189	
Unknown vs. female			.0316 (.0071) .000	
Country of origin			-.0227 (.0051) .000	
Number of followers			1.95e-08 (1.48e-08) .188	
Constant	.0607 (.0204) .003	.0607 (.0281) .031	.0687 (.0267) .010	-.0403 (.0373) .280

Notes: Errors are in parentheses; *p*-values are in bold.

Table 3. Topic modeling and interpretation

Focus on Influencer			
Topic	Interpretation	Top 15 Words	Illustrative Quotes
Topic 1 41.8%	Identification	Influencer, focus, company, smithson, andy, people, individual, equally, glamorglow, person, influencers, article, actions, readers, story	<i>“Readers are more likely to be drawn to stories involving a known figure than a company with less personal appeal or relatability.”</i> <i>“I think it would make a better story more interesting to focus on a person rather than a company. It will make things more personal.”</i>
Topic 2 11.8%	Identification	Influencers, influencer, focus, andy, smithson, people, think, followers, trust, make, campaigns, public, expect, significant, impactful	<i>“We should focus more on the influencer, because influencers have a direct and personal connection with their followers, often fostering a sense of trust and authenticity[...].”</i> <i>“I chose to focus on Andy Smithson, the influencer [...], focusing on him could resonate more strongly with audiences who follow such figures and expect transparency.”</i>
Topic 3 16.4%	Journalists’ self-serving motives	People, influencer, likely, attention, know, read, influencers, story, interested, want, influence, tend, probably, think, readers	<i>“It would attract more traffic, and gives the story a face to remember.”</i> <i>“Because this is more likely to grab the attention of others as people will know who he is.”</i>
Topic 4 20%	Accountability	People, company, glamorglow, face, campaign, influencer, andy, smithson, role, accountability, focus, influencers, charity, likely, influence	<i>“It was his decision to carry out the fraud against the charity.”</i> <i>“He is the one that is allegedly in the wrong.”</i>
Topic 5 10%	Gloating	Company, influencer, people, social, personal, doing, dirty, impact, media, does, audience, followers, influencing, campaign, brought	<i>“A company doing something dirty is just something that’s expected these days, but an influencer doing it is a hot news item. People love to see their heroes fall because it is more personal than seeing a big faceless company get in trouble over something. Microsoft does something dirty, no one cares. Mr. Beast does something dirty, the Internet blows up. That’s the nature of things.”</i>
Focus on Company			
Topic 1 32.2%	Systemic corporate deception	Glamorglow, smithson, influencers, andy, influencer, campaign, role, company, public, practices, responsibility, just, deception, responsible, corporate	<i>“Focusing on the company emphasizes the central entity responsible for orchestrating the campaign and managing the \$20 million in falsely advertised revenues [...], the company’s accountability in overseeing the operations and making deceptive claims likely had a broader and more systemic impact.”</i> <i>“It highlights corporates accountability orchestrating the deception and spotlighting the influencers role in misleading followers.”</i>
Topic 2 67.8%	Financial and organizational resource advantage	Company, focus, influencer, people, brand, impact, feel, know, responsible, likely, think, story, money, claims, probably	<i>“The company is where the money is!”</i> <i>“Companies, generally, have the biggest responsibility and say in money and revenue.”</i> <i>“The company is more at blame, as they have a multitude of people to oversee their assets.”</i>

Web Appendices

From influence to infamy: Responses to company-influencer transgressions

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Web Appendix A: Empirics-first approach and procedure

The empirics-first approach, first introduced by Golder et al. (2023), reverses the conventional process of marketing research. Rather than starting from extant theory and predefined hypotheses, as in the dominant theory-first paradigm, an empirics-first study begins with a meaningful real-world marketing phenomenon. Researchers first collect and analyse data, allowing insights to emerge directly from the phenomenon itself. These insights may inform theory, refine it, or simply offer managerially actionable implications. In short, the empirical reality, not prior theory, informs and sets the direction of the research. The figure below details how we apply the empirics-first approach in the present research.

Suggested Steps of the Empirics-First Approach	Application of the Suggested Steps of the Empirics-First Approach to Our Research	Empirical Application of the Empirics-First Approach to Our Research
Step 1 Begin with a real-world phenomenon	We start with a managerially and societally relevant event: the Ferragni-Balocco scandal. This high-profile transgression raises an unresolved question: When a company and an influencer jointly violate consumer expectations, who receives more blame?	
Step 2 Gather empirical evidence from the phenomenon	We collect real-world longitudinal data from public tweets, capturing consumer responses in the immediate aftermath of the scandal.	Study 1: Longitudinal study on consumer sentiment toward the influencer and the company following the company-influencer transgression.
Step 3 Look for unexpected patterns or tensions in the data	The results of Study 1 reveal a surprising pattern: consumers express significantly more negative sentiment toward the influencer than toward the company. This empirical anomaly becomes the central puzzle driving the next stage.	
Step 4 Let empirical observations drive the next research question	To understand why this asymmetry emerges, we generate possible mechanisms based on the initial empirical pattern. Prominence appears to be a plausible mechanism, as influencers often cultivate close personal connections with their followers.	
Step 5 Collect additional data to evaluate new mechanisms (iterative refinement)	<p>We run additional studies investigating the reasons behind the previous findings.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p>Prominence and financial resource advantage show no significant effect, contradicting expectations and signalling the need to further refine our inquiry.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p>We return to the literature and begin suspecting that, because consumers often learn about transgressions through media coverage, the media could be the main driver behind the effect.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p>We explore media legitimacy as a candidate driver and gather new data. Studies consistently show that media coverage is more negative toward the influencer than toward the company.</p>	<p>Studies 2a and 2b: Manipulating company and influencer prominence and financial resource advantage, respectively.</p> <p>Study 3: Sentiment analysis of tweets from media outlets. Study 4: Survey of professional journalists. Studies 5a and 5b: Loss of media legitimacy increases consumer negativity; this effect is driven by decreased consumer identification; the effect applies to influencers but not to companies.</p>
Step 6 Generate marketing-relevant insights	We explore three remedial strategies used by influencers.	Studies 6a and 6b: Testing remedial strategies for influencers, assessing which approach most effectively mitigates backlash.

Web Appendix B: Review of the relevant empirical literature

Panel A: Literature on brand transgressions

Source	Aim of the research	Multi-actor transgression	Multimethod and longitudinal approach	Dependent variable(s)
Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava (2000)	Investigating how consumers process negative information in the marketplace	N	N	Change in attitude toward the brand (before vs. after)
Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel (2004)	Investigating the evolution of relationships between consumers and an online photography brand in response to brand personality (sincere vs. exciting) and transgression manipulations	N	Y	Brand commitment, brand intimacy, brand satisfaction, self-connection with the brand
Klein and Dawar (2004)	Investigating the possibility that the CSR halo affects consumer attributions in the context of a product-harm crisis	N	N	Buying intentions
Chung and Beverland (2006)	The authors explore whether and how consumers forgive firms for transgressions that befall their shared relationship	N	N	Consumer forgiveness
van Heerde, Helsen, and Dekimpe (2007)	Quantifying the impact of product crises on marketing metrics such as sales or market share	N	N	Sales, market share
Dawar and Lei (2009)	The authors conceptualize brand crises as well-publicized instances of claims that a key brand proposition is unsubstantiated or false, and investigate their effects on consumer cognitions and behavior	N	N	Brand evaluations
Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux (2009)	Exploring the roles of time and relationship strength on consumer revenge and avoidance in online public complaining contexts	N	Y	Desire for revenge, desire for avoidance
Huber et al. (2010)	Investigating how brand misconduct influences consumers' repurchase intentions toward the affected brand	N	N	Repurchase intentions
Grappi, Romani, and Bagozzi (2013)	Exploring consumer responses to irresponsible corporate actions and addressing two key gaps in the literature: the limited research on consumer responses to corporate harm and the need for theory-driven investigations	N	N	Consumer actions, protest behaviors, negative word-of-mouth

Source	Aim of the research	Multi-actor transgression	Multimethod and longitudinal approach	Dependent variable(s)
Romani, Grappi, and Bagozzi (2013)	Exploring the effects of perceived CSR on consumer responses, mediated by felt gratitude and moderated by the magnitude of altruistic values held by consumers	N	N	Positive word-of-mouth, advocacy behaviors
Magnusson et al. (2014)	Investigating whether product-level beliefs influence country-level beliefs, examining shifts in consumer attitudes toward a country as result of a brand transgression	N	N	Attitude toward same-country brands (same product category vs. other product categories)
Trump (2014)	Investigating consumer forgiveness of brand transgressions if the brand's actions are personally relevant or if the negative actions are of an ethical nature rather than related to product performance	N	N	Brand evaluations
Hsiao, Shen, and Chao (2015)	Investigating how brand misconduct and advertising affect the brand-customer relationship, considering the roles of e-service quality, consumer satisfaction, brand commitment, and advocacy intentions	N	N	Advocacy intentions
Sohn and Lariscy (2015)	Casting light on the roles of corporate ability and CSR on valence of reputation during different company crisis situations	N	N	Consumer overall attitudes, consumer satisfaction, trust, commitment, loyalty
Tsarenko and Tojib (2015)	Examining the interplay between the severity of a brand transgression, consumers' prior awareness of the firm's CSR initiatives, and the firm's response (apology vs. apologia) on the rates of forgiveness among consumers	N	N	Repurchase intentions
Antonetti and Maklan (2016)	Exploring a model of moral outrage that extends existing research by identifying its cognitive antecedents	N	N	Negative word-of-mouth

Source	Aim of the research	Multi-actor transgression	Multimethod and longitudinal approach	Dependent variable(s)
Sinha and Lu (2016)	Investigating how consumers respond when they have close relationships with a brand that they perceive to be at fault	N	N	Consumer forgiveness intentions, negative word-of-mouth intentions
Thomas and Fowler (2016)	Investigating how transgressions committed by a brand negatively impact consumers' attitudes toward the endorsing celebrity	N	N	Brand trust, brand attitudes, willingness to pay a price premium
Antonetti and Maklan (2017)	Exploring the role of compassion in responses to irresponsible corporate behavior involving victim narratives, identifying antecedents of compassion, and empirically testing a model explaining its consequences	N	N	Protest behavior, signing an online petition, negative word-of-mouth
Grégoire et al. (2018)	Examining whether customers feel better or worse after enacting revenge, helping managers understand whether initial actions against the firm satisfy or intensify their desire to continue punishing it (referred to as post-desire for revenge)	N	Y	Consumer post-desire for revenge
Johnson, Folkes, and Wang (2018)	Exploring how consumers' moral judgments of a firm's brand reputation are influenced by information about an employee's non-workplace transgression, considering the effect of perceived employee power in the firm	N	N	Purchase intentions, product quality
Kim, Park, and Lee (2019)	Investigating the interactive effects of brand biography and brand transgression type on consumers' forgiveness intention. Examining how consumers' high identification with underdog brands affects their forgiveness intention across different transgression types	N	N	Forgiveness intentions
Kuchmaner, Wiggins, and Grimm (2019)	Investigating whether and how consumer-to-consumer influence within virtual brand communities plays a role when brands engage in transgressions	N	N	Likelihood to punish the brand, likelihood to help the brand
Khamitov, Grégoire, and Suri (2020)	Reviewing over 200 articles published around the topics of brand transgressions, product-harm crises, and service failure and recovery, suggesting a broad and unified discipline of negative events in marketing	N	N	-

Source	Aim of the research	Multi-actor transgression	Multimethod and longitudinal approach	Dependent variable(s)
Stäbler and Fischer (2020)	Investigating the damage that corporate social irresponsibility events cause to a firm and how that depends on coverage in high-reach news media	N	Y	Stock market response to corporate social irresponsibility events
Giannetti and Srinivasan (2021)	Examining the spillover effects from brand-level, firm-level, and country-level recalls on the sales of non-recalled products, while also examining how advertising and pricing of non-recalled products interact with these recalls to influence sales	N	Y	Sales of non-recalled products
Johnson, Bauer, and Arnold (2022)	Investigating the impact of a severe brand crisis on a celebrity endorser's reputation and endorsement portfolio	N	N	Attitude toward the endorser, attitude toward bystander brands
Ryoo (2022)	Examining how consumers react when a brand with a reputation for being moral inconsistently transgresses moral guidelines	N	N	Permissibility of transgression
Septianto and Kwon (2022)	Investigating whether and how having a cute brand logo reduces consumer punishment of a transgressing brand. The study explores the cognitive processes underlying the cuteness effect by building on prior research on the malleability of human characteristics	N	N	Consumer punishment
Aw and Labrecque (2023)	Investigating the impact of celebrity endorsers on consumers' responses to an endorsed brand in the aftermath of a transgression	N	N	Brand trust, brand forgiveness
Matthews and Luebke (2023)	Examining how the centrality and consistency of a transgression influence key consumer perceptions and behavioral intentions toward a person-brand	N	N	Digital engagement intentions
Davvetas, Ulqinaku, and Katsikeas (2024)	Investigating (1) how, when, and why brand origin affects consumer responses to brand transgressions, (2) differences in managerial impact and post-transgression recovery across domestic and foreign markets, (3) managerial interventions that alleviate transgressions' impact at home and abroad	N	Y	Consumer anger, consumer forgiveness, willingness to purchase, brand reputation, net brand value, brand satisfaction

Panel B: Literature on endorser transgressions

Source	Aim of the research	Multi-actor transgression	Multimethod and longitudinal approach	Dependent variable(s)
Louie, Kulik, and Jacobson (2001)	Investigating how a company's financial performance is affected when celebrity endorsers are involved in undesirable events	N	N	Abnormal returns
Louie and Obermiller (2002)	Investigating how companies should respond to celebrity endorsers' involvement in negative events	N	N	Responses toward the company
Money, Shimp, and Sakano (2006)	Investigating how the type of negative information about a celebrity affects brand evaluations in the U.S. and Japan	N	N	Brand/product evaluations
Fong and Wyer (2012)	Investigating the impact of a celebrity scandal on consumer attitudes toward the involved celebrities and the products they endorse	N	N	Attitude toward celebrities, attitude toward products, purchase intentions
Thwaites et al. (2012)	Investigating the impact of negative publicity on celebrity ad endorsements	N	N	Celebrity attractiveness, celebrity credibility
Bartz, Molchanov, and Stork (2013)	Investigating how the announcement of negative information about a celebrity endorser impacts firm value	N	N	Abnormal returns
Carrillat, D'Astous, and Lazure (2013)	Investigating the optimal brand response to a celebrity scandal	N	N	Attitude toward the brand, purchase intentions
Um (2013)	Investigating the effects of consumer attribution styles in the evaluation of negative information about a celebrity endorser	N	N	Attitude toward the brand, purchase intentions
Zhou and Whitla (2013)	Investigating consumer responses to negative celebrity publicity	N	N	Attitude toward brand, attitude toward target celebrity, attitude toward other celebrity endorsers
Carrillat, D'Astous, and Christianis (2014)	Investigating whether the adverse effects on brand attitudes engendered by a celebrity endorser transgression spill over competitor brands	N	N	Attitude toward the endorsed brand, attitude toward competitors
Knittel and Stango (2014)	Investigating the stock market effects of the Tiger Woods scandal on his sponsors and sponsors' competitors	N	N	Abnormal returns
Lee and Kwak (2016)	Investigating how celebrity endorser transgressions impact the associated brands	N	N	Attitude toward the brand, purchase intentions
Um and Kim (2016)	Investigating factors that influence consumer brand evaluation and purchase intention under negative celebrity information	N	N	Brand evaluation, purchase intentions
Boeuf (2017)	Investigating the impact of a celebrity's death on blame attribution and consumer attitudes in the context of celebrity endorser misbehavior	N	N	Blame attribution, attitude toward the brand, attitude toward the celebrity

Source	Aim of the research	Multi-actor transgression	Multimethod and longitudinal approach	Dependent variable(s)
Hock and Raithel (2019)	Investigating the economic effects of company responses to negative publicity involving celebrity endorsers	N	N	Abnormal returns
Kennedy, Baxter, and Illicic (2019)	Investigating the effectiveness of film personas as brand endorsers compared to celebrities, including during celebrity transgressions	N	N	Attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the brand, purchase intentions
Lee, Kwak, and Bagozzi (2021)	Investigating how cultural background affects consumers' moral reasoning choice (moral coupling vs. moral decoupling)	N	N	Attitude toward the endorser, attitude toward the brand, purchase intentions
Kang and Park (2022)	Investigating cross-cultural differences between South Korea and the U.S. in consumer support for celebrities involved in moral transgressions and the brands they endorse	N	N	Support for celebrity, attitude toward the brand, purchase intentions
von Mettenheim and Wiedmann (2023)	Investigating transgressions caused by influencers and mapping the size of their impacts on the influencer and the brand	N	N	Influencer trust, brand trust, purchase intentions, engagement, financial risk
Kleine, Friederich, and Paul (2024)	Investigating the impact of celebrity endorser scandals on competitor stock returns	N	N	Abnormal returns

Panel C: Literature on influencer marketing

Source	Method	Context	Key Variables	Mechanism	Transgression	Key Findings
Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks (2019)	Secondary data + controlled experiment	Influencer effectiveness	Awareness vs. trial campaign, source expertise, hedonic value of post, campaign incentives, blog vs. Facebook	N/A	N	For sponsored posts in blogs, high blogger expertise is more effective when the intent is to increase awareness vs. stimulate trial. Source expertise does not affect engagement with Facebook posts. On Facebook, posts high on hedonic content are more effective when the intent is to stimulate trial vs. to increase awareness. The effectiveness of campaign incentives depends on the platform: incentives increase (decrease) engagement on blogs (Facebook)
Lanz et al. (2019)	Secondary data	Influencer marketing effectiveness	Status difference	N/A	N	The responsiveness of seeding targets decreases as status difference increases. Unknown creators benefit more from targeting low-status (vs. high-status) users
Valsesia, Proserpio, and Nunes (2020)	Secondary data + controlled experiments	Influencer effectiveness	Number of users an influencer is following	Perceived Influence	N	Following fewer others, conditional on having a substantial number of followers, increases a social media user's perceived influence. Higher perceived influence increases engagement
Gerrath and Usrey (2021)	Secondary data + survey + controlled experiments	Influencer effectiveness	Review valence, intrinsic (vs. extrinsic) incentivization acceptance motives, incentivization commonness, review vs. lifestyle influencers	Credibility	N	Intrinsic incentivization acceptance motives mitigate the negative effect of positive incentivized reviews on credibility and revisit intention and behavior. Review influencers' followers' responses are determined by their perceptions of incentivized review commonness. Lifestyle influencers' followers' responses are driven by the communicated incentivization acceptance motives, regardless of perceived commonness
Zhang, Chintagunta, and Kalwani (2021)	Field experiment	Influencer marketing effectiveness	Influencer on a low-cost social media support platform	Credibility	N	A low-cost social media support platform encourages product adoption by helping consumers understand the product and reducing concerns. During the trial stage, the platform falls short compared to personalized one-on-one support. Introducing an influencer, even without product expertise, helps resolve these issues by vouching for the product's credibility
Karagür et al. (2022)	Secondary data + controlled experiments	Influencer effectiveness	Disclosure vs. not, in-text disclosure vs. disclosure using the branded content tool	Perception of advertising, trustworthiness	N	When offered via a platform-initiated branded content tool, disclosure exerts the strongest effect on perceptions of advertising, reducing influencer trustworthiness and engagement

Source	Method	Context	Key Variables	Mechanism	Transgression	Key Findings
Leung et al. (2022)	Secondary data	Influencer marketing effectiveness and influencer effectiveness	Influencer marketing spend, influencer activity, influencer originality, follower size, post positivity, sponsor salience, new product launch, follower-brand fit	N/A	N	Influencer originality, follower size, and sponsor salience increase influencer marketing effectiveness. Posts that announce new product launches reduce it. Influencer activity, follower-brand fit, and post positivity exhibit inverted U-shaped moderating effects on influencer marketing effectiveness
Chen, Yan, and Smith (2023)	Secondary data	Influencer effectiveness	Influencer disclosure, brand appearance timing, video customization, subjective endorsement, brand-influencer fit, platform disclosure	Authenticity	N	Explicitly disclosing brand sponsorship, alone, and in combination with platform disclosure, positively impacts engagement. Early brand appearance, high video customization, and influencers' subjective endorsements, such as sharing personal experiences or opinions, reduce engagement
Wies, Bleier, and Edeling (2023)	Secondary data + controlled experiments	Influencer effectiveness	Follower count, content customization, brand familiarity	N/A	N	There is an inverted U-shaped relationship between influencers' follower count and engagement. A higher follower count implies broader reach but also signals a weaker relationship that reduces followers' engagement likelihood
Beichert et al. (2024)	Secondary data + field experiments	Influencer effectiveness	Low- vs. high-followerhip influencers	Engagement	N	Low-followerhip influencers outperform high-followerhip influencers in terms of return on investment. The effect is mediated by engagement
Cascio Rizzo et al. (2024)	Automated text/image/video/audio analysis + controlled experiments	Influencer effectiveness	High-arousal language in micro-versus macro-influencers	Trustworthiness	N	High-arousal language increases engagement with micro-influencers, but decreases engagement with macro-influencers, because it makes micro- (macro-) influencers appear more (less) trustworthy
Daniels and Wu (2024)	Secondary data + controlled experiments	Influencer effectiveness	Disabling social media comments	Consumer voice receptiveness, sincerity	Y	Consumers form more negative impressions of and are less persuaded by influencers who disable social media comments. These outcomes are driven by the perception that the influencer is less receptive to consumer voice and less sincere

Source	Method	Context	Key Variables	Mechanism	Transgression	Key Findings
Gu, Zhang, and Kannan (2024)	Secondary data	Influencer marketing effectiveness	Number of big influencers, number of small influencers	Trust	N	There is a negative interaction between big and small influencers when used together due to reduced trust in big influencers and substitution effects. Sales generated by a big influencer are negatively affected by small influencers who promoted the same product previously (but not the other way around). Big influencers reach a larger audience, whereas small influencers are more effective at increasing conversion rates
Lanz et al. (2024)	Data-based simulations	Influencer marketing effectiveness	N/A	N/A	N	Firms would benefit from targeting prospective influencers while they are unknown and sign them to endorse the firm in the future
Tian, Dew, and Iyengar (2024)	Representation learning model for quantifying video content, machine learning-based causal inference	Influencer marketing effectiveness	N/A	N/A	N	The authors develop a framework for estimating the follower elasticity of impressions, that is, a video's percentage gain in impressions corresponding to a percentage increase in the number of followers of the creator
Barari, Eisend, and Jain (2025)	Meta-analysis	Influencer effectiveness	Size, various other characteristics of the influencer, message, product, social media platform, and followers	Credibility, attractiveness	N	This meta-analysis shows that social media influencers significantly boost consumer engagement and purchase intention more effectively than brand posts, virtual influencers, or celebrities. Their impact operates through credibility and attractiveness and is moderated by factors such as influencer size
Duffek et al. (2025)	In-depth interviews	Influencer effectiveness	Authenticity	N/A	N	Authenticity is co-constructed but inconsistently defined across stakeholders; agencies play a role in resolving tensions and sustaining long-term influencer authenticity
Gamlin and Touré-Tillery (2025)	Secondary data + controlled experiments	Influencer effectiveness	Indulgent vs. self-controlled influencers	Interpersonal instrumentality expectations, social connection	N	Consumers are less willing to connect with people who are indulgent (vs. self-controlled) because they believe such people will negatively influence their valued goals. Willingness to connect affects receptivity to word-of-mouth recommendations
Pan et al. (2025)	Meta-analysis	Influencer marketing effectiveness and influencer effectiveness	Various post, follower, and influencer characteristics	Persuasion knowledge, source credibility	N	Follower traits (social identity) most strongly shape attitudes and engagement, post features (informational and hedonic value) drive purchase intentions, and influencer communication most strongly affects purchase behavior and sales. These effects operate through persuasion knowledge and source credibility and vary by social media platform type and product characteristics
Song et al. (2025)	Secondary data	Influencer marketing effectiveness	Influencer scheduling strategy	N/A	N	The authors examine the effects of influencers' scheduling strategy on engagement transitions and viewers' gratuities

Web Appendix C: Study 1 Examples, parallel trends assumption, and robustness checks

Panel A: Exemplary tweets in our dataset

	Exemplary Tweet (Translated from Italian to English)
Balocco: Pretreatment period	Baked cheesecake with a Balocco biscuit base, sugar-free chocolate chips and coffee, topped with Fruyo strawberry Greek yogurt and strawberry pieces. 🍪🍓 With a good herbal tea, the day can start in the best way.
	Yes please to the new Balocco cookies with cornflakes and oat flakes.
	Artisanal panettone: €45. Balocco's: barely €4. Balocco, saint now! #Christmas #panettone
Balocco: Treatment period	What I find interesting about this whole story, which should make companies think twice before investing in these influenCers, is that the entire marketing operation was a failure, with sales far below expectations. 🤔 #balocco
	Part of the problem, in my opinion, is that many would have bought those Balocco pandori even without the promise of a charitable donation.
	As far as I'm concerned, Balocco products can stay right on the shelf. #Balocco
Ferragni: Pretreatment period	In love with my new phone case 💖💎 @ChiaraFerragni
	Chiara Ferragni's Christmas makeup tip? A total look perfect for everyone – #makeup #Chiara #Ferragni #Christmas
	I'm literally crying, this is the most beautiful scene ever 😭 They're such a wonderful and pure family. @ChiaraFerragni @Fedez #theFerragnez #TheFerragnezTheSeries
Ferragni: Treatment period	I'm still amazed at those who follow her and her sidekicks!!! And they're even dazzled by their stolen riches!!!!!! Shame. #chiaraferragni
	I want to see if Ferragni will have the guts to talk in first person about the huge mess she's stepped into, because honestly, I'm sick of this 'just complain, never explain' attitude.
	Liar. She clearly implied that part of the proceeds would go to the hospital. Shameless. #chiaraferragni

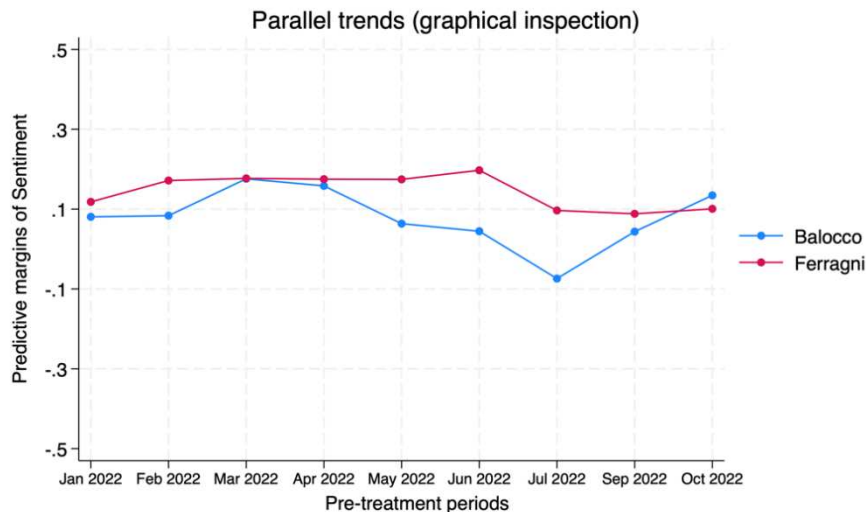
Panel B: Parallel trends assumption

A key assumption of DID estimation is the parallel trends assumption, which requires that, in the absence of treatment, the treatment and control groups would have followed similar trends in the dependent variable, ensuring that any observed posttreatment differences can be attributed to the treatment effect.

To test this assumption, we analyzed the monthly sentiment of tweets about Ferragni and Balocco during the pretreatment period (January 2022 to October 2022, excluding August 2022). Using an OLS estimation and a series of placebo tests with October 2022 as the reference period, the results indicate that differences in the dependent variable between the influencer and the company were not significantly different from zero ($F(8, 27498) = 1.54, p = .137$), supporting the parallel trends assumption. Figure WC1 below illustrates

sentiment trends for both Ferragni and Balocco across the pretreatment period. A graphical inspection further confirms that empirical evidence does not violate the parallel trends assumption.

Figure WC1: Parallel trends assumption: graphical inspection



Panel C: Robustness checks

To ensure the robustness of our findings, we conducted additional checks. First, we replicated the analysis using the internal sentiment measure provided by Pulsar as dependent variable. This measure categorizes tweet sentiment into three classes: positive, negative, and neutral. We employed a multinomial logit model with the neutral category as the baseline. The results confirm our previous findings: tweets about Ferragni are significantly more likely to be negative than neutral ($b = 0.602, p < .001$), while they are marginally significantly less likely to be positive than neutral ($b = -0.251, p = .087$). Second, we included August 2022, when the owner of Balocco died in an accident, in the pretreatment period. Our results hold under this expanded time frame ($b = -0.097, p < .001$). Third, we asked Pulsar to retrieve tweets posted in November and December 2022, during the collaboration. The results show that the main effect holds even when including the collaboration period in the pretreatment window ($b = -0.127, p < .001$). Interestingly, we find no significant difference in sentiment scores before and during the collaboration for either Ferragni or Balocco ($b = -0.014, p = .831$), suggesting that the collaboration did not meaningfully improve consumer responses toward either party.

Panel D: Tweets mentioning both Ferragni and Balocco

In a subsequent step, we collected tweets that mentioned both Chiara Ferragni and Balocco. Reasonably, no such tweets were found in the pretreatment period; all 26,073 tweets in this category were posted during the treatment period. Since this data was retrieved later, the Pulsar platform no longer provided the original continuous IBM Watson’s sentiment score, but instead returned a simplified version: -1 for negative, 0 for neutral, and +1 for positive

sentiment. Accordingly, we used this categorical sentiment variable as our dependent measure. Because there were no tweets mentioning both actors in the pretreatment period, we could not run a DID analysis. Instead, we conducted a multinomial logistic regression focusing exclusively on the treatment period, comparing the sentiment of tweets mentioning: (0) Balocco only, (1) Ferragni only, or (2) both Balocco and Ferragni. The results show that tweets mentioning both actors are significantly more likely to be negative (vs. neutral) than those mentioning Balocco only ($b = 2.11, p < .001$). However, these tweets are not significantly more likely to be positive (vs. neutral) than those mentioning Balocco only ($b = -0.017, p = .852$). Compared to tweets mentioning Ferragni only, tweets mentioning both are more likely to be negative (vs. neutral) ($b = 1.740, p < .001$) and less likely to be positive (vs. neutral) ($b = -0.171, p < .001$). These findings hold when controlling for gender, country, and number of followers.

That said, as noted in the main text, these results should be interpreted with caution. Following recommendations for maintaining independence in group comparisons (Kenny and Judd 1986), we initially chose not to include tweets mentioning both actors in our main analysis. This is because mixed mentions violate the independence assumption by conflating sentiments toward both parties. To partially address this issue and better understand the focus of tweets mentioning both Ferragni and Balocco, we leveraged Pulsar's "Entities" feature, which uses natural language processing to identify the main entities (e.g., people, organizations) referenced in each tweet. This tool highlights which actor, if any, is the primary subject of the tweet, allowing us to classify mixed-mention tweets based on whether they focus on the influencer, the company, or both. Applying this tool to the dataset, we found that 76% of tweets mentioning both actors had Ferragni as the main entity, while Balocco was not recognized at all (e.g., "Chiara Ferragni and the balocco case"). Another 24% recognized both Ferragni and Balocco as primary entities. Importantly, no tweet in this set identified Balocco alone as the main entity without also recognizing Ferragni.

Based on this information, we reclassified our independent variable into four levels: (0) tweets mentioning Balocco only, (1) tweets mentioning Ferragni only, (2) tweets mentioning both where Ferragni is recognized as the main entity, and (3) tweets where both actors are mentioned and recognized as main entities. A new multinomial logit using this refined independent variable revealed consistent results with Study 1: tweets most likely to be negative (vs. neutral) are those mentioning both actors but focusing only on Ferragni ($b = 2.186, p < .001$). These tweets are also less likely to be positive (vs. neutral) ($b = -0.186, p = .001$).

Finally, when directly comparing tweets mentioning both actors but with Ferragni as the only recognized entity to tweets where both were recognized, the former are more likely to be negative (vs. neutral) ($b = 0.280, p < .001$) and less likely to be positive (vs. neutral) ($b = -0.445, p < .001$). These findings further support our earlier conclusion in Study 1 that, even in tweets mentioning both actors, the focus tends to remain primarily on the influencer, with sentiment being more negative toward her.

Web Appendix D: Descriptive statistics across studies

Table WD1: Means across studies

Variable	Study	Mean
Sentiment (overall)	1	$M_{\text{Ferragni-pre}} = 0.15$ $M_{\text{Balocco-pre}} = 0.06$ $M_{\text{Ferragni-post}} = -0.003$ $M_{\text{Balocco-post}} = -0.02$
Attitudes toward the influencer (consumers)	2a	$M_{\text{Prominent-company \& prominent-influencer}} = 2.92$ $M_{\text{Nonprominent-company \& nonprominent-influencer}} = 3.33$ $M_{\text{Prominent-company \& nonprominent-influencer}} = 2.75$ $M_{\text{Nonprominent-company \& prominent-influencer}} = 3.14$
Attitudes toward the company (consumers)	2a	$M_{\text{Prominent-company \& prominent-influencer}} = 3.33$ $M_{\text{Nonprominent-company \& nonprominent-influencer}} = 3.22$ $M_{\text{Prominent-company \& nonprominent-influencer}} = 2.96$ $M_{\text{Nonprominent-company \& prominent-influencer}} = 3.06$
Attitudes toward the influencer (consumers)	2b	$M_{\text{Influencer's financial resource advantage}} = 2.05$ $M_{\text{Company's financial resource advantage}} = 1.98$ $M_{\text{Control}} = 2.04$
Attitudes toward the company (consumers)	2b	$M_{\text{Influencer's financial resource advantage}} = 2.20$ $M_{\text{Company's financial resource advantage}} = 2.24$ $M_{\text{Control}} = 1.88$
Sentiment (journalists)	3	$M_{\text{Ferragni-pre}} = 0.16$ $M_{\text{Balocco-pre}} = -0.05$ $M_{\text{Ferragni-post}} = 0.07$ $M_{\text{Balocco-post}} = 0.05$
Article focus (journalists)	4	$M_{\text{Focus}} = 5.61$
Sentiment of headlines (journalists)	4	FrequencyNegativeVader-Influencer = 57.81% FrequencyNegativeBlob-Influencer = 61.25%
Attitudes toward the influencer (consumers)	5a	$M_{\text{Focus influencer}} = 1.89$ $M_{\text{Focus company}} = 2.25$
Attitudes toward the company (consumers)	5a	$M_{\text{Focus company}} = 2.18$ $M_{\text{Focus influencer}} = 2.39$
Attitudes toward the transgressor (consumers)	5b	$M_{\text{Influencer}} = 2.29$ $M_{\text{Company}} = 2.34$
Journalists' self-serving motives (consumers)	5b	$M_{\text{Influencer}} = 3.89$ $M_{\text{Company}} = 3.69$
Accountability (consumers)	5b	$M_{\text{Influencer}} = 4.92$ $M_{\text{Company}} = 4.68$
Identification (consumers)	5b	$M_{\text{Influencer}} = 2.15$ $M_{\text{Company}} = 2.70$
Gloating (consumers)	5b	$M_{\text{Influencer}} = 3.53$ $M_{\text{Company}} = 3.29$
Media legitimacy	6a	$M_{\text{Favorable journalist}} = 3.38$ $M_{\text{Critical journalist}} = 4.12$ $M_{\text{Story}} = 3.34$
Attitudes toward the influencer (consumers)	6b	$M_{\text{Favorable journalist}} = 2.70$ $M_{\text{Critical journalist}} = 2.78$ $M_{\text{Story}} = 2.37$

Table WD2: Means across genders

Study	Variable	Gender = Female	Gender = Male	Difference across genders	Correlation with age
1	Sentiment (overall)	M = 0.05	M = 0.02	$t = 9.02, p < .001^*$	no information on age
2a	Attitudes toward the influencer (consumers)	M = 3.14	M = 2.92	$t = 1.15, p = .25$	$r = -.13, p = .01^*$
2a	Attitudes toward the company (consumers)	M = 3.27	M = 3.01	$t = 1.31, p = .19$	$r = -.08, p = .11$
2b	Attitudes toward the influencer (consumers)	M = 2.03	M = 2.01	$t = 0.13, p = .90$	$r = -.02, p = .68$
2b	Attitudes toward the company (consumers)	M = 2.08	M = 2.16	$t = -0.51, p = .61$	$r = .05, p = .36$
3	Sentiment (journalists)	M = 0.09	M = 0.06	$t = 2.46, p = .01^*$	no information on age
4	Article focus (journalists)	M = 5.52	M = 5.71	$t = -0.46, p = .65$	$r = -.05, p = .46$
5a	Attitudes toward the influencer (consumers)	M = 2.00	M = 2.15	$t = -1.08, p = .28$	$r = -.10, p = .10$
5a	Attitudes toward the company (consumers)	M = 2.27	M = 2.30	$t = -0.24, p = .81$	$r = -.04, p = .48$
5b	Attitudes toward the transgressor (consumers)	M = 2.22	M = 2.44	$t = -1.23, p = .22$	$r = -.14, p = .02^*$
5b	Journalists' self-serving motives (consumers)	M = 3.79	M = 3.79	$t = -0.02, p = .98$	$r = -.03, p = .64$
5b	Accountability (consumers)	M = 4.77	M = 4.84	$t = -0.48, p = .63$	$r = -.20, p = .01^*$
5b	Identification (consumers)	M = 2.28	M = 2.61	$t = -1.54, p = .13$	$r = -.03, p = .60$
5b	Gloating (consumers)	M = 3.37	M = 3.46	$t = -0.45, p = .65$	$r = -.0004, p = .10$
6a	Media legitimacy	M = 3.66	M = 3.54	$t = 0.41, p = .68$	$r = .13, p = .05^*$
6b	Attitudes toward the influencer (consumers)	M = 2.72	M = 2.41	$t = 2.09, p = .04^*$	$r = .06, p = .30$

Note: *The results persist when we include this variable as a control.

Table WD3: Means across countries in Studies 1 and 3

Study	Variable	Country = Italy	Country = Other than Italy	Difference across countries
1	Sentiment (overall)	M = 0.03	M = 0.08	t = -9.02, $p < .001^*$
3	Sentiment (overall)	M = 0.12	M = 0.05	t = 3.26, $p = .001^*$

Note: *As reported in the main manuscript, the results persist when we include country as a control.

Web Appendix E: Study 2a pretest and stimuli

Panel A: Pretest

Participants and method. To ensure that our selected influencers and companies appropriately represent different levels of prominence, we conducted a validation study requesting 100 U.S.-based participants through Prolific (final N = 97). Each participant evaluated all four stimuli, two influencers (Khloé Kardashian as the prominent influencer, Rachel Zeilic as the nonprominent influencer) and two companies (Sephora as the prominent company, Oribe as the nonprominent company). The order of presentation was randomized to prevent potential order effects. Upon beginning the study, participants were informed that they would evaluate influencers and companies based on their personal perceptions. Each stimulus was presented with an image (a photo for the influencers and a logo for the companies).

Measures. Participants rated each stimulus using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = “Strongly disagree” and 7 = “Strongly agree”).

Prominence Items

- I frequently come across [Influencer/Company] in my daily life (e.g., through social media posts, products, advertisements, or news).
- [Influencer/Company] is highly visible in the social media and beauty industry.
- My thoughts and feelings about [Influencer/Company] come to my mind naturally and instantly (adapted from Park et al. 2010).
- My thoughts and feelings about [Influencer/Company] come to mind so naturally and instantly that I don't have much control over them (adapted from Park et al. 2010).
- My thoughts and feelings about [Influencer/Company] often come to mind automatically, seemingly on their own (adapted from Park et al. 2010).

We also measured the extent to which the influencers and companies are perceived as decision-makers, to examine whether perceptions of control correlate with prominence.

Perception of control item

- [Influencer/Company] plays an important role as a key decision-maker in their industry.

The prominence scale demonstrates high reliability across all stimuli (α ranging from .86 to .91) and a single-factor structure (eigenvalues between 3.24 and 3.74). Descriptive analyses

showed the following ratings for prominence: Khloé Kardashian ($\alpha = .88$; $M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.45$; eigenvalue = 3.39), Rachel Zeilic ($\alpha = .86$; $M = 1.94$, $SD = 1.01$; eigenvalue = 3.24), Sephora ($\alpha = .91$; $M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.57$; eigenvalue = 3.67), and Oribe ($\alpha = .91$; $M = 2.09$, $SD = 1.23$; eigenvalue = 3.74). For decision-making influence, the ratings were: Khloé Kardashian ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.44$), Rachel Zeilic ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 1.53$), Sephora ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 1.64$), and Oribe ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.53$).

Results. To validate that the selected influencers and brands differed in perceived prominence, we conducted paired t-tests comparing prominence scores across conditions. Paired t-tests confirmed that the prominent influencer and prominent brand were rated significantly higher in prominence than their nonprominent counterparts. Specifically, Khloé Kardashian ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.45$) was perceived as significantly more prominent than Rachel Zeilic ($M = 1.94$, $SD = 1.01$), $t(96) = 10.55$, $p < .001$. Similarly, Sephora ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.57$) was perceived as significantly more prominent than Oribe ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 1.23$), $t(96) = 9.03$, $p < .001$. Further comparisons showed that Khloé Kardashian was rated as significantly more prominent than Oribe ($t(96) = 9.76$, $p < .001$), and Sephora was rated as significantly more prominent than Rachel Zeilic ($t(96) = 9.50$, $p < .001$). Importantly, there was no significant difference in prominence ratings between Khloé Kardashian and Sephora ($t(96) = -1.49$, $p = .140$) or between Oribe and Rachel Zeilic ($t(96) = 1.70$, $p = .092$). These findings confirm that our stimuli effectively manipulate prominence while maintaining comparability across influencers and companies. The non-significant differences between prominent (and nonprominent) conditions across categories suggest a balanced design, where the prominent influencer and prominent company are perceived as equally high in prominence, and the nonprominent influencer and nonprominent company are perceived as equally low. This supports the internal validity of our manipulation.

Moreover, we examined the relationship between perceived prominence and perceived control. We conducted pairwise correlation analyses for each stimulus. The results indicate a significant positive correlation between prominence and control perceptions for all influencers and companies. The correlation was strongest for Sephora ($r = .79$, $p < .001$), followed by Oribe ($r = .68$, $p < .001$) and Rachel Zeilic ($r = .67$, $p < .001$). The weakest correlation was observed for Khloé Kardashian ($r = .34$, $p < .001$). These findings suggest that entities perceived as more prominent are also seen as decision-makers, that is, as having greater control.

Panel B: Stimuli

Condition: Prominent influencer, Prominent company

Sephora—top cosmetics company—and Khloé Kardashian—top fashion and beauty influencer—face backlash for allegedly deceiving their consumers and followers by promoting a philanthropic campaign with false claims. Sephora and Khloé Kardashian falsely advertised that profits from the newest release of their collaboration capsule collection (Khloé Kardashian x Sephora) would entirely support the Cancer Research Institution at GWDC, while part of the profits were cashed by the influencer and part by the company. Revenues from this collaboration were approximately \$20 million. The Federal Trade Commission immediately started investigating all operations related to this campaign.

Condition: Prominent influencer, Nonprominent company

Oribe—cosmetics company—and Khloé Kardashian—top fashion and beauty influencer—face backlash for allegedly deceiving their consumers and followers by promoting a philanthropic campaign with false claims. Oribe and Khloé Kardashian falsely advertised that profits from the newest release of their collaboration capsule collection (Khloé Kardashian x Oribe) would entirely support the Cancer Research Institution at GWDC, while part of the profits were cashed by the influencer and part by the company. Revenues from this collaboration were approximately \$20 million. The Federal Trade Commission immediately started investigating all operations related to this campaign.

Condition: Nonprominent influencer, Prominent company

Sephora—top cosmetics company—and Rachel Zeilic—fashion and beauty influencer—face backlash for allegedly deceiving their consumers and followers by promoting a philanthropic campaign with false claims. Sephora and Rachel Zeilic falsely advertised that profits from the newest release of their collaboration capsule collection (Rachel Zeilic x Sephora) would entirely support the Cancer Research Institution at GWDC, while part of the profits were cashed by the influencer and part by the company. Revenues from this collaboration were approximately \$20 million. The Federal Trade Commission immediately started investigating all operations related to this campaign.

Condition: Nonprominent influencer, Nonprominent company

Oribe—cosmetics company—and Rachel Zeilic— fashion and beauty influencer— face backlash for allegedly deceiving their consumers and followers by promoting a philanthropic campaign with false claims.

Oribe and Rachel Zeilic falsely advertised that profits from the newest release of their collaboration capsule collection (Rachel Zeilic x Oribe) would entirely support the Cancer Research Institution at GWDC, while part of the profits were cashed by the influencer and part by the company.

Revenues from this collaboration were approximately \$20 million. The Federal Trade Commission immediately started investigating all operations related to this campaign.

Web Appendix F: Study 2b stimuli

Scenario in the influencer's financial resource advantage condition

“Multimillionaire and top influencer Isaac Grace, with a net worth of \$45 million, faces backlash for allegedly deceiving his followers by promoting GameGlow’s—a newly launched gaming company with net value of \$50k—philanthropic campaign with false claims. Grace falsely advertised that profits from the newest release of GameGlow would entirely support the Paediatric Ward of a public hospital in a deprived area in the North-West. The Federal Trade Commission immediately halted all operations related to this campaign.”

Scenario in the company's financial resource advantage condition

“Emergent influencer Isaac Grace, with a net worth of \$50k, faces backlash for allegedly deceiving his followers by promoting GameGlow’s—a multimillionaire and market leading gaming company with net value of \$45 millions—philanthropic campaign with false claims. Grace falsely advertised that profits from the newest release of GameGlow would entirely support the Paediatric Ward of a public hospital in a deprived area in the North-West. The Federal Trade Commission immediately halted all operations related to this campaign.”

Scenario in the control condition

“GameGlow—a gaming company—and Isaac Grace—influencer—face backlash for allegedly deceiving their consumers and followers by promoting GameGlow’s philanthropic campaign with false claims. GameGlow and Grace falsely advertised that profits from the newest release of the company would entirely support the Paediatric Ward of a public hospital in a deprived area in the North-West. The Federal Trade Commission immediately halted all operations related to this campaign.”

Web Appendix G: Study 4 stimuli and robustness checks

Panel A: Stimuli

Please refer to the following fact:

Andy Smithson— influencer—and GlamorGlow—an online company—face backlash for allegedly deceiving their consumers and followers by promoting a philanthropic campaign with false claims. Influencer and company falsely advertised that profits from the revenues of this campaign, approximately \$20 million, would entirely support the Cancer Research Institution at USC. The Federal Trade Commission immediately halted all operations related to this campaign.

Please refer to the following fact:

GlamorGlow—an online company—and Andy Smithson— influencer—face backlash for allegedly deceiving their consumers and followers by promoting a philanthropic campaign with false claims. Company and influencer falsely advertised that profits from the revenues of this campaign, approximately \$20 million, would entirely support the Cancer Research Institution at USC. The Federal Trade Commission immediately halted all operations related to this campaign.

Panel B: Expert validation

To assess the accuracy and interpretive validity of the topics generated in the LDA analysis, we asked two independent researchers to provide their own thematic interpretations of journalists' rationales for focusing on the influencer. Both researchers, one expert in influencer marketing and one in corporate social responsibility, received the 110 raw rationales without topic labels or summaries and worked independently without any communication. Their interpretations closely aligned with ours.

Independent Researcher A identified four themes:

- Responsibility – Who is perceived as more to blame or accountable for the misconduct (the influencer, the company, or both), similar to our *Accountability* theme.
- Selfish reasons – Focusing on the influencer to attract more clicks, sales, or attention, similar to our *Self-serving motives*.
- Individual appeal – Audiences' general preference for stories about people, especially public figures, similar to our *Identification*.
- Individual scandal appeal – Audiences' fascination with influencers' wrongdoing or moral failure (keywords such as *villain*, *mud*, *dirt*, *failure*, and *fall*), similar to our *Gloating*.

These themes closely matched the topics identified in our analysis. Independent Researcher B, working separately, also identified the same four themes with minor wording differences. Their independent interpretations reinforced the consistency and validity of our findings.

Panel C: Robustness check with additional study

We conducted an additional study with the aim of understanding *why* the media focuses more on influencers, considering journalists' expectations about how readers will respond, as these expectations can directly shape editorial decisions about which actor to foreground.

To address this issue more directly and building on the four drivers identified through the LDA analysis in Study 4, we conducted an additional study. This study was designed specifically to provide empirical support for the mechanisms suggested by text analysis.

The study was conducted with a new sample of journalists recruited through Prolific, similar in profile but non-overlapping with the sample used in Study 4. To address a potential limitation of Study 4, we restricted participation to journalists with more than three years of professional experience ($N = 77$), thereby excluding very junior journalists. Participants were shown the same stimuli as in the main study and were asked whom they would focus on more when covering the event (1 = company, 10 = influencer). As in the main study, we recoded responses as 1 if participants indicated they would focus more on the influencer (i.e., chose a value above the scale midpoint of 5.5) and 0 otherwise.

Participants then reported the reasons for their choice by responding to measures capturing the four drivers identified in the LDA analysis: (1) journalists' self-serving motives, (2) accountability, (3) expected reader identification with the transgressor, and (4) gloating. A logistic regression predicting the likelihood of focusing on the influencer showed that stronger journalists' self-serving motives and greater expectations that readers would identify with the transgressor significantly increase the likelihood of focusing on the influencer. In contrast, accountability and gloating were not significant predictors, see Table WG1 below.

Table WG1. Results of the robustness check study

DV = Focus on the influencer	
Variables	Coefficient (standard error)
Self-serving motives	0.772*** (0.206)
Expected reader identification with the transgressor	0.559** (0.274)
Gloating	0.246 (0.236)
Accountability	-0.156 (0.220)
Constant	-5.048*** (1.481)
<i>N</i>	77
<i>Pseudo R2</i>	30.68%

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses, *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Web Appendix H: Study 5a stimuli and robustness checks

Panel A: Stimuli

Condition: Media focus (i.e., loss of media legitimacy) on influencer

"Influencer Scandal: Andy Smithson Accused of Misleading Followers in Fake Charity Campaign"

"Andy Smithson (and GlamorGlow) Exposed: Influencer Faces Backlash for Alleged Charity Deception"

"FTC Shuts Down campaign between Andy Smithson and GlamorGlow: Influencer's 'Phony' Philanthropic Campaign Amid Consumer Outrage"

"Broken Trust: Influencer Slammed for False Cancer Research Donation Promises with online brand"

"\$20 Million Hoax? Influencer Andy Smithson Under Fire for Fraudulent Charity Claims"

"Andy Smithson (in collaboration with GameGlow) Faces Public Outrage Over Alleged Fake Philanthropy Scheme"

Condition: Media focus (i.e., loss of media legitimacy) on company

"Company Scandal: GlamorGlow Accused of Misleading Consumers in Fake Charity Campaign"

"GlamorGlow (and influencer Andy Smithson) Exposed: Company Faces Backlash for Alleged Charity Deception"

"FTC Shuts Down campaign between Glamorglow and Influencer: Company's 'Phony' Philanthropic Campaign Amid Consumer Outrage"

"Broken Trust: Company Slammed for False Cancer Research Donation Promises with online influencer"

"\$20 Million Hoax? Company GlamorGlow Under Fire for Fraudulent Charity Claims"

"GlamorGlow (in collaboration with Andy Smithson) Faces Public Outrage Over Alleged Fake Philanthropy Scheme"

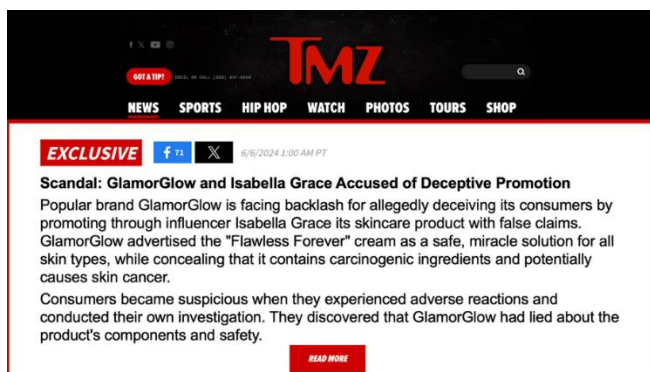
Panel B: Effect of media legitimacy on consumer responses with different transgression

We employed a between-subject experimental design, manipulating the loss of media legitimacy of the influencer (vs. the company) and assessing its effect on consumer responses. To ensure generalizability, we used a fictional transgression and, in this case, fictional names for both the influencer (Isabella Grace) and the company (GlamorGlow).

Participants and method. We requested a sample of 300 participants residing in the United States through Prolific (60.33% female, 38.67% male, 1% other or did not disclose; $M_{\text{age}} = 38.83$ years, $SD = 12.06$).

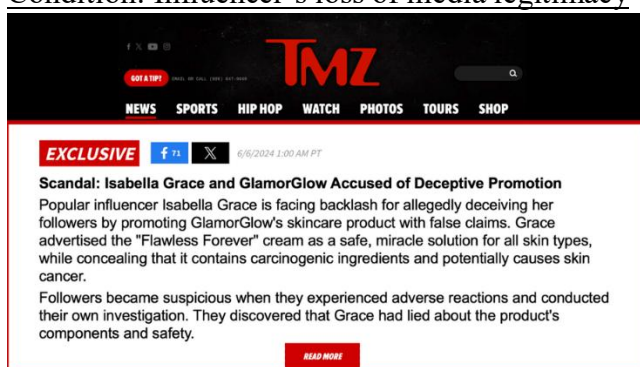
We informed participants that they would be reading information about a collaboration between a company and an influencer. We manipulated the loss of media legitimacy by randomly assigning participants to one of two conditions: loss of media legitimacy of the company (i.e., the focus of coverage is mostly on the company) versus loss of media legitimacy of the influencer (i.e., the focus of coverage is mostly on the influencer), respectively. In both conditions, participants read that the company and the influencer were facing backlash for allegedly deceiving their consumers and followers by promoting a product with false claims. In this case, to generalize our findings, we did not use philanthropy as the context.

Condition: Company's loss of media legitimacy



The screenshot shows a TMZ news article. The header includes the TMZ logo, a search bar, and navigation links for NEWS, SPORTS, HIP HOP, WATCH, PHOTOS, TOURS, and SHOP. The article is marked as 'EXCLUSIVE' and dated 6/6/2024 1:00 AM PT. The title is 'Scandal: GlamorGlow and Isabella Grace Accused of Deceptive Promotion'. The text states: 'Popular brand GlamorGlow is facing backlash for allegedly deceiving its consumers by promoting through influencer Isabella Grace its skincare product with false claims. GlamorGlow advertised the "Flawless Forever" cream as a safe, miracle solution for all skin types, while concealing that it contains carcinogenic ingredients and potentially causes skin cancer. Consumers became suspicious when they experienced adverse reactions and conducted their own investigation. They discovered that GlamorGlow had lied about the product's components and safety.' A 'READ MORE' button is visible at the bottom.

Condition: Influencer's loss of media legitimacy



The screenshot shows a TMZ news article. The header includes the TMZ logo, a search bar, and navigation links for NEWS, SPORTS, HIP HOP, WATCH, PHOTOS, TOURS, and SHOP. The article is marked as 'EXCLUSIVE' and dated 6/6/2024 1:00 AM PT. The title is 'Scandal: Isabella Grace and GlamorGlow Accused of Deceptive Promotion'. The text states: 'Popular influencer Isabella Grace is facing backlash for allegedly deceiving her followers by promoting GlamorGlow's skincare product with false claims. Grace advertised the "Flawless Forever" cream as a safe, miracle solution for all skin types, while concealing that it contains carcinogenic ingredients and potentially causes skin cancer. Followers became suspicious when they experienced adverse reactions and conducted their own investigation. They discovered that Grace had lied about the product's components and safety.' A 'READ MORE' button is visible at the bottom.

Next, participants rated their attitudes toward the influencer and the company using the same measure as in Study 2a ($\alpha_{\text{influencer}} = .98$; $M_{\text{influencer}} = 2.10$, $SD = 1.18$; eigenvalue = 3.73; $\alpha_{\text{company}} = .97$; $M_{\text{company}} = 1.57$, $SD = 0.97$; eigenvalue = 3.72). We then thanked the participants for their time, told them that the story was fictional, and compensated them.

Results. We tested the effect of loss of media legitimacy on consumer responses to influencers and companies, separately, using a one-way ANOVA, with loss of media legitimacy as the independent grouping variable and consumer attitude as the dependent variable and proxy for consumer responses. We did not find any significant overall effect of loss of media legitimacy on consumer attitudes toward the company ($p = .808$, $\eta^2 = .0002$). However, we found an effect on attitudes toward the influencer ($M_{\text{focus_company}} = 2.28$ vs. $M_{\text{focus_influencer}} = 1.92$; $F(1, 298) = 7.37$, $p = .007$, $\eta^2 = .02$).

Discussion. The objective of this study was to replicate our previous findings on the role of media legitimacy in shaping consumer responses toward each party involved in multi-actor transgressions between companies and influencers, using a context different from that of charitable donations. We again find that when media coverage emphasizes the influencer's wrongdoing (i.e., when the influencer loses media legitimacy), consumer attitudes toward the influencer decline. However, this effect does not extend to the company, as a loss of media legitimacy does not significantly influence consumer attitudes toward it.

Panel C: Effect of media legitimacy on consumer responses manipulating the severity of media legitimacy loss

We conducted this study to further examine the role of loss of media legitimacy in shaping consumer responses. This study investigates how different levels of severity of loss of media legitimacy (neutral vs. negative sentiment in media headlines) influence consumer responses to a transgression.

Participants and method. We recruited participants in the United States ($N = 500$, 48.70% female, 49.30% male, 2% other or not disclosing, $M_{\text{age}} = 40.34$ years, $SD = 14.23$) through Prolific to take part in the study in return for monetary compensation. We told participants that they would be reading some information regarding a company-influencer transgression. We followed by manipulating the loss of media legitimacy. Specifically, we manipulated the loss of media legitimacy by focusing on the influencer (vs. the company) in the media headlines. In the influencer's loss of media legitimacy conditions, participants read: "*Andy Smithson— influencer—and GameGlow—an online company—face backlash for allegedly deceiving their consumers and followers by promoting a philanthropic campaign with false claims. Smithson and GameGlow falsely advertised that profits from the revenues of this campaign, approximately \$20 million, would entirely support the Cancer Research Institution at USC. The Federal Trade Commission immediately halted all operations related to this campaign.*"

Similarly, in the company's loss of media legitimacy conditions, participants read: "*GameGlow—an online company—and Andy Smithson— influencer—face backlash for*

allegedly deceiving their consumers and followers by promoting a philanthropic campaign with false claims. GameGlow and Smithson falsely advertised that profits from the revenues of this campaign, approximately \$20 million, would entirely support the Cancer Research Institution at USC. The Federal Trade Commission immediately halted all operations related to this campaign.”

In the neutral sentiment conditions, the headlines were framed in a non-accusing and unbiased way, such as "FTC Steps In: Andy Smithson’s Campaign Under Review for Charity Claims" or "GameGlow Faces Inquiries Over Cancer Research Donation Promises in Recent Campaign," while in the negative sentiment ones, the titles were framed in an accusing tone, such as "FTC Shuts Down Andy Smithson’s ‘Phony’ Philanthropic Campaign Amid Consumer Outrage", or "Broken Trust: GameGlow Slammed for False Cancer Research Donation Promises." Specifically, participants saw:

Condition: Influencer’s loss of media legitimacy, neutral sentiment



Condition: Influencer’s loss of media legitimacy, negative sentiment



Condition: Company's loss of media legitimacy, neutral sentiment



Condition: Company's loss of media legitimacy, negative sentiment



After reading the headlines, participants indicated their attitudes toward the influencer and toward the company, separately, on the same measure as in Study 4a ($\alpha_{\text{influencer}} = .95$; $M_{\text{influencer}} = 2.48$, $SD = 1.48$; $\text{eigenvalue} = 3.45$; $\alpha_{\text{company}} = .95$; $M_{\text{company}} = 2.43$, $SD = 1.54$; $\text{eigenvalue} = 3.51$). Participants then reported their age and gender. They were thanked for their time and debriefed that this news was only for research purposes and not true.

Results. We tested the effect of loss of media legitimacy and sentiment on consumer responses initially with a two-way ANOVA where loss of media legitimacy is the independent grouping variable, sentiment is the moderator, and consumer attitudes is the dependent variable and proxy for consumer responses. Initially, we tested the effect of loss of media legitimacy of the influencer (1 = influencer and 0 = company) and sentiment (negative = 1 and neutral = 0) on consumer attitudes toward the influencer. We found a significant interaction effect ($F(1, 496) = 3.926, p = .048$). To follow, we tested the same effect on consumer attitudes toward the company. We found a marginal interaction effect ($F(1, 496) = 3.3, p = .070$). Additionally, we tested whether the sentiment of the headlines had any effect on consumer attitudes toward the influencer using Model 1 in Process v3.5, where the independent variable is loss of media legitimacy (1 = influencer and 0 = company), the moderator is the sentiment of the headlines (negative = 1 and neutral = 0). We found support

for the interaction effect ($b = 0.52$, $SE = 0.26$, $p = .048$) and for the main effects of loss of media legitimacy ($b = -0.36$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = .055$) and sentiment ($b = -0.49$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = .009$). The results of a Johnson-Neyman procedure suggest that, while there is an overall negative effect of loss of media legitimacy on consumer responses toward the influencer, as in Study 5a (effect neutral = -0.36 , $SE = 0.19$, $p = .055$), this is attenuated when the sentiment of media headlines is very negative (effect negative = 0.17 , $SE = 0.19$, $p = .37$). We repeated these analyses for consumer attitude toward the company. We found marginal support for the interaction effect ($b = 0.50$, $SE = 0.27$, $p = .07$) but only a significant main effect of sentiment ($b = -0.43$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = .028$). The Johnson-Neyman procedure shows no effect of loss of media legitimacy on consumer responses toward the company (as in Study 5a). The effect is not affected by the sentiment of the headlines (effect neutral = -0.30 , $SE = 0.19$, $p = .12$, effect negative = 0.20 , $SE = 0.20$, $p = .314$).

Discussion. The results of this study confirm that the loss of media legitimacy negatively affects consumer responses toward the influencer, but not toward the company. However, when media sentiment toward the influencer becomes excessively negative, the negative effect is attenuated.

Panel D: Effect of media legitimacy on consumer responses with different influencer size (macro vs. nano)

In this experimental study, we causally examine the effect of influencer size on consumer responses to a multi-actor transgression. We manipulate the loss of media legitimacy for a macro influencer versus a nano influencer, using two baseline conditions: one in which the influencer's size is unspecified, and another in which the media focus is placed on the company.

Participants and method. We recruited participants from the United States and United Kingdom who were fluent in English ($N = 400$; 50.75% female, 47.75% male, 1.5% other or did not disclose; $M_{age} = 45.95$ years, $SD = 13.37$) through Prolific to take part in the study in return for monetary compensation. We told participants that they would be reading information about a company-influencer transgression using the same stimuli as in Study 5a for the two baseline conditions. In the nano [macro] influencer condition, we added the information that the influencer had 5,034 [160,740] followers in the Instagram account, building on Beichert et al. (2024). After reading the headlines, participants indicated, in random order, their attitudes toward the influencer and the company using the same scale of Study 5a ($\alpha_{influencer} = .95$, $M_{influencer} = 1.70$, $SD = 1.02$, eigenvalue = 3.51; $\alpha_{company} = .96$, $M_{company} = 2.03$, $SD = 1.17$, eigenvalue = 3.58). Participants reported their age and gender. We thanked them for their time and told them that this news was only for research purposes.

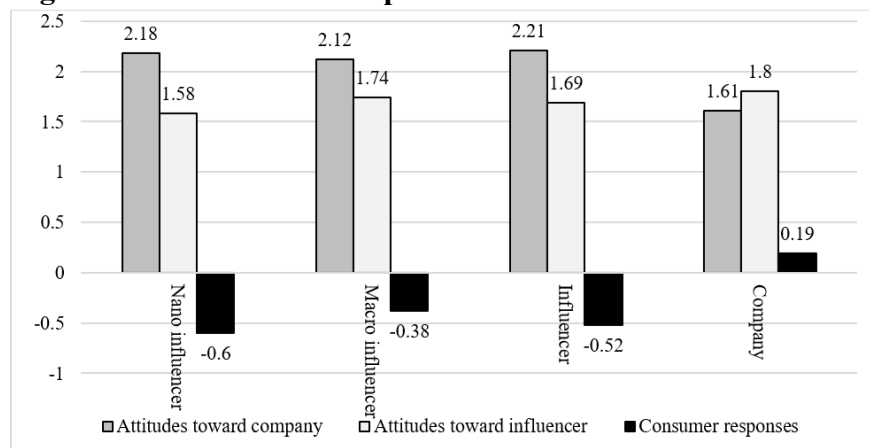
Results and discussion. We tested the effect of influencer size on consumer responses using a one-way ANOVA, with the variable indicating each condition (i.e., nano influencer, macro influencer, unspecified influencer size, company) as the independent variable and consumer attitudes as the dependent variable and proxy for consumer responses. Consumer responses were calculated as the difference between attitudes toward the influencer and attitudes toward the company, in order to capture responses directed at the focal actor rather

than the other. Higher values indicate less punitive attitudes toward the influencer and lower values indicate more punitive attitudes toward the influencer. We found a significant effect of the independent variable on consumer responses ($F(3, 396) = 17.55, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$). Because our primary interest was the effect of influencer size on consumer responses, we conducted pairwise comparisons to identify the source of the ANOVA's significance. The results indicated that the only significant differences were between conditions in which the media focus was on the influencer versus on the company (see Table WH1 and Figure WH1 below).

Table WH1: Pairwise comparisons

Comparison	Contrast	SE	t	P> t	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Influencer (baseline) vs. Company (baseline)	-0.71	0.12	-5.87	0	-1.02	-0.39
Nano influencer vs. Company (baseline)	-0.79	0.12	-6.57	0	-1.10	-0.48
Macro influencer vs. Company (baseline)	-0.57	0.12	-4.75	0	-0.88	-0.26
Nano influencer vs. Influencer (baseline)	-0.08	0.12	-0.68	0.904	-0.39	0.23
Macro influencer vs. Influencer (baseline)	0.14	0.12	1.15	0.657	-0.17	0.45
Macro influencer vs. Nano influencer	0.22	0.12	1.84	0.257	-0.09	0.53

Figure WH1: Pairwise comparisons



These results suggest that the size of the influencer does not serve as a meaningful predictor of consumer responses. The findings remain consistent when analysing attitudes toward the influencer and toward the company separately. Thus, we can exclude influencer size, potentially an additional proxy within attribution theory, as a relevant factor in explaining consumer responses. However, the results provide further evidence supporting the role of media legitimacy in shaping consumer responses.

Web appendix I: Study 5b stimuli

Condition: Influencer's loss of media legitimacy

"Influencer Scandal: Sammy Anderson Accused of Misleading Followers in Fake Charity Campaign"

"Sammy Anderson (and LabOS) Exposed: Influencer Faces Backlash for Alleged Charity Deception"

"FTC Shuts Down campaign between Sammy Anderson and LabOS: Influencer's 'Phony' Philanthropic Campaign Amid Consumer Outrage"

"Broken Trust: Influencer Slammed for False Cancer Research Donation Promises with online brand"

"\$20 Million Hoax? Influencer Sammy Anderson Under Fire for Fraudulent Charity Claims"

"Sammy Anderson (in collaboration with LabOS) Faces Public Outrage Over Alleged Fake Philanthropy Scheme"

Condition: Company's loss of media legitimacy

"Company Scandal: LabOS Accused of Misleading Consumers in Fake Charity Campaign"

"LabOS (and influencer Sammy Anderson) Exposed: Company Faces Backlash for Alleged Charity Deception"

"FTC Shuts Down campaign between LabOS and Influencer: Company's 'Phony' Philanthropic Campaign Amid Consumer Outrage"

"Broken Trust: Company Slammed for False Cancer Research Donation Promises with online influencer"

"\$20 Million Hoax? Company LabOS Under Fire for Fraudulent Charity Claims"

"LabOS (in collaboration with Sammy Anderson) Faces Public Outrage Over Alleged Fake Philanthropy Scheme"

Web Appendix J: Study 6a stimuli

Intervention with story: Next week, Sam Collins—an influencer—has decided to publicly address a past controversy by: Posting a story on their social media accounts about the scandal. This decision comes in response to an event that made headlines several months ago. At the time, Sam Collins and Velve Inc. —an online company— were at the center of a major controversy. They faced intense backlash after being accused of misleading consumers and followers by promoting a philanthropic campaign under false pretenses. They had claimed that all profits—approximately \$20 million—would be donated to the Cancer Research Institution at USC. However, an investigation revealed that only a small fraction of the funds had actually been allocated to the charity. As a result, the Federal Trade Commission shut down all operations related to the campaign. The controversy was widely covered in the media and is now recognized as a past event. The key question now is how Sam Collins' decision to talk will be received.

Intervention with critical journalist: Next week, Sam Collins—an influencer—has decided to publicly address a past controversy by: Giving an interview to journalist Alex Carter, who was highly critical of the influencer during the scandal and openly condemned their actions. This decision comes in response to an event that made headlines several months ago. At the time, Sam Collins and Velve Inc. —an online company— were at the center of a major controversy. They faced intense backlash after being accused of misleading consumers and followers by promoting a philanthropic campaign under false pretenses. They had claimed that all profits—approximately \$20 million—would be donated to the Cancer Research Institution at USC. However, an investigation revealed that only a small fraction of the funds had actually been allocated to the charity. As a result, the Federal Trade Commission shut down all operations related to the campaign. The controversy was widely covered in the media and is now recognized as a past event. The key question now is how Sam Collins' decision to talk will be received.

Intervention with favorable journalist: Next week, Sam Collins—an influencer—has decided to publicly address a past controversy by: Giving an interview to journalist Alex Carter, who was notably supportive of the influencer during the scandal and consistently defended them against criticism. This decision comes in response to an event that made headlines several months ago. At the time, Sam Collins and Velve Inc. —an online company— were at the center of a major controversy. They faced intense backlash after being accused of misleading consumers and followers by promoting a philanthropic campaign under false pretenses. They had claimed that all profits—approximately \$20 million—would be donated to the Cancer Research Institution at USC. However, an investigation revealed that only a small fraction of the funds had actually been allocated to the charity. As a result, the Federal Trade Commission shut down all operations related to the campaign. The controversy was widely covered in the media and is now recognized as a past event. The key question now is how Sam Collins' decision to talk will be received.

Web Appendix K: Study 6b stimuli and replication

Panel A: Stimuli

Condition: Intervention with story

"Sam Collins Speaks Out: Influencer Addresses Charity Scandal in Live Social Media Story"

"No More Silence: Sam Collins Confronts Allegations in Real-Time with Followers"

"Sam Collins Takes to Social Media: Influencer Breaks Silence on \$20M Charity Controversy"

Condition: Intervention with critical journalist

"Under Fire: Sam Collins Faces Relentless Grilling from Harshest Critic Over Charity Scandal"

"Sam Collins vs. His Toughest Opponent: Influencer Confronts Fierce Journalist in Explosive Interview"

"No Mercy: Influencer Sam Collins Endures Ruthless Questioning Over \$20M Charity Controversy"

Condition: Intervention with favorable journalist

"Sam Collins Breaks Silence: Supportive Journalist Helps Uncover the Truth Behind Charity Scandal"

"In Defense of Sam Collins: Influencer Sits Down with Journalist to Address Allegations"

"Guided by Trust: Sam Collins Opens Up to Longtime Supporter in Exclusive Interview on \$20M Controversy"

Panel B: Replication of Study 6b

We are aware that the manipulations used in Study 6b differed substantially and may have introduced potential confounds due to variations in the headlines. To address this issue, we conducted an additional study in which we standardized the media information across all conditions, ensuring consistent wording of the headlines (see below).

We collected data from 362 participants through Prolific (slightly exceeding the planned sample of 360), who shared the same characteristics as participants in the main study. Based on the same exclusion criteria, we removed 53 participants who failed the manipulation check, resulting in a final sample of 309 participants (56.31% female, 42.07% male, < 2% other or not disclosing, $M_{\text{age}} = 40.98$ years, $SD = 12.56$). We conducted a one-way ANOVA with the type of intervention (i.e., story with followers, interview with a critical journalist, interview with a favorable journalist) as the independent variable and consumer responses as the dependent variable ($F(2, 306) = 5.93, p = .003, \eta^2 = .04$). Pairwise comparisons showed that participants expressed a more positive attitude toward the influencer when they intervened through an interview with a critical journalist, compared to both an interview with a favorable journalist ($b_{\text{favorable vs. critical}} = -0.48, SE = 0.18; t = -2.7, p = .007$) and a story with their followers ($b_{\text{story vs. critical}} = -0.56, SE = 0.18; t = -3.18, p = .002$). No significant difference emerged between the story and favorable journalist conditions ($b_{\text{story vs. favorable}} = -0.08, SE = 0.18; t = -0.47, p = .64$).

Condition: Intervention with story

**"Collins Chooses their Social Media for for Tell-All
Declarations After Charity Scandal"**

**"Influencer to face up to past transgressions in
exclusive social media story on personal Instagram
account"**

**"Sam Collins Speaks Out: Releases
exclusive Instagram story"**

Condition: Intervention with critical journalist

**"Collins Chooses Harsh Critic for Tell-All Interview
After Charity Scandal"**

**"Influencer to face up to past transgressions in
exclusive interview with staunch critic"**

**"Sam Collins Speaks Out: Faces Hostile
Journalist in Exclusive One-on-One
Interview"**

Condition: Intervention with favorable journalist

"Collins Chooses Familiar Ally for Tell-All Interview After Charity Scandal"

"Influencer to face up to past transgressions in exclusive interview with close friend"

"Sam Collins Speaks Out: Faces Supportive Journalist in Exclusive One-on-One Interview"

Web Appendix L: Practical implications

Stage	Key Aspect(s) Identified	Recommended Actions for Companies	Recommended Actions for Influencers
Before a transgression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Collaborations may lack clear accountability · Influencers face higher reputational risks due to greater identification with audiences · The media closely monitors influencers' actions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Consider collaborating with influencers who have strong audience identification, as they will be more motivated to avoid transgressions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Avoid overexposure through excessive collaborations · Prepare crisis communication plans
During the transgression (attribution unclear)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Media and consumers blame influencers more than companies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Monitor media coverage and public sentiment · Avoid distancing too early · Maintain coordinated, factual communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Respond promptly and transparently · Acknowledge issue without defensiveness · Engage authentically with more critical audiences
After the transgression (repair phase)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The loss of media legitimacy can be mitigated when influencers engage with critical media outlets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Collaborate with the audience with maximum transparency to salvage trust 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Proactively engage with critical media to signal accountability · Emphasize authenticity and corrective behavior to rebuild trust

Web Appendix M: Future research directions

Future Research Area	Key Questions	Potential Practical Implications
<i>Antecedents of company-influencer transgressions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What factors increase the likelihood of transgressions? • How do partnership characteristics, industry contexts, and influencer roles contribute? • How do contractual ambiguity, value misalignment, and high-risk product categories play a role? 	Identifying early warning signs could help companies and influencers anticipate and mitigate risks before transgressions occur
<i>Role of influencer type in media legitimacy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does prior media engagement (e.g., interviews, journalist interactions) shape post-transgression backlash? • Does preexisting media legitimacy affect backlash intensity? 	Understanding how different types of influencers navigate media scrutiny could help shape their communications' strategy
<i>Long-term effects on other stakeholders</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do transgressions make other brands more hesitant to collaborate with an influencer? • How do these incidents influence partnerships and trust? 	Insights could help companies assess long-term reputational risks in influencer partnerships
<i>Spillover effects on other influencers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does a high-profile transgression lead to broader media and consumer skepticism toward influencers as a whole? 	Insights could clarify how perceptions of influencer marketing are formed
<i>Artificial intelligence- (AI-) generated influencers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do accountability and public perceptions differ when the influencer is AI-generated? • Who is held responsible: the brand, the developer, or the AI persona? • Does media legitimacy function differently for AI influencers? 	Insights could help shape regulations and ethical guidelines for AI-driven influencer marketing
<i>Content of remedial strategies</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does a defensive versus an accommodative response shape consumer and media reactions differently? • How do emotional versus rational appeals interact with media legitimacy? 	Insights could provide companies and influencers with guidance on crisis communication strategies
<i>Consumer identification and its moderators</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What factors enhance or mitigate consumer identification with an influencer? • How do cultural background, values, moral expectations, and loyalty influence consumer reactions? 	Insights could help brands and influencers tailor messaging to different audience segments for better crisis management
<i>Misinformation and informational uncertainty in transgressions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does media intermediation amplify or mitigate the spread and legitimization of false or misleading accusations? • How do consumers revise responsibility attributions and trust once misinformation is corrected? 	Findings could support the development of guidelines to prevent premature blame allocation in influencer-brand controversies
<i>Role of regulatory and institutional authorities</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the involvement (or absence) of regulators and oversight bodies influence media framing and public accountability in company-influencer transgressions? • To what extent do official investigations or sanctions shape consumer trust and perceptions of legitimacy? 	Findings could inform policy development and foster clearer accountability mechanisms among influencers, brands, and regulatory agencies

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