



From influence to infamy: Responses to company-influencer transgressions

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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 (364 M+ 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 (60 M+ followers) and Jordin Sparks (2.2 M 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 et al., 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 et al., 2020; Knittel & 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 et al., 2013;

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Fong & 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 et al., 2022b, 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 et al., 2020; Knittel & Stango, 2014), while influencers experience losses to personal brand equity, credibility, and long-term career prospects (Bartz et al., 2013; Fong & 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 & 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 & 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 (Deephhouse, 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 et al., 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 et al., 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 et al., 2018), often arising from transgressions or breaches of implicit or explicit relational norms (Aaker et al., 2004; Banerjee et al., 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 et al., 2015; Khamitov et al., 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 et al., 2024; Klein & 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 et al., 2020). Most of this literature focuses on brand transgressions, for instance, poor customer support (Grégoire et al., 2009; Kim & Choi, 2018) or CSR violations (Aaker et al., 2004; Klein & Dawar, 2004; Tsarenko & 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 et al., 2024; Grégoire et al., 2009). Such reactions occur because transgressions erode trust, reduce customer satisfaction (Sohn & Lariscy, 2015), and negatively influence brand attitudes and evaluations, particularly when consumers perceive a lack of fairness or accountability (Klein & 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 & Langner, 2010) or symbolic meaning (McCracken, 1989). Negative associations can also spill over, harming brand evaluations (Um & Kim, 2016), purchase intentions (Fong & Wyer, 2012), and firm value (Bartz et al., 2013; Louie et al., 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 et al. 2013; Leung et al., 2022b). In contrast, company-influencer collaborations often involve co-created content and shared public narratives, blurring the lines of responsibility between the two parties (Leung et al., 2022b). 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 et al. 2025; Cascio Rizzo et al. 2024; Leung et al., 2022a; Valsesia et al.

2020) or on how companies can optimize influencer marketing strategies (e.g., Lanz et al., 2024; Tian et al., 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 et al., 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 & Statman, 2012), including contributions to societal well-being through CSR and activism (Branco & Rodrigues, 2006). Consequently, financial resource advantage is linked to stronger expectations of ethical behavior and social engagement (Orlitzky et al., 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 et al., 2022b). 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 & 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 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.

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 et al., 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 & 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.

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 et al., 2010). This conceptualization, however, is product-oriented rather than actor-oriented, and therefore less relevant for transgression research.

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.

Table 1 Overview of studies

<i>Sample</i>	<i>Methodology</i>	<i>Aim</i>
Study 1 N = 80,314 tweets mentioning Ferragni or Balocco Platform: X; Jan-Oct 2022; Dec 2023 to Jul 2024	Evidence from a real-world case with consumers' X data 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 N = 301 Ps Country: USA Platform: Prolific Gender: 69.1% F Age: M = 39.93, SD = 12.50	Prominence and financial resource advantage as determinants of consumer responses 2 × 2 between-subjects design manipulating influencer prominence (high vs. low) and company prominence (high vs. low) Between-subjects experiment (3 conditions) manipulating influencer financial resource advantage, company financial resource advantage, control	Causally test whether actor prominence explains the asymmetric consumer responses observed in Study 1 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	Evidence from a real-world case with journalists' X data 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	Media legitimacy (journalists' perspective) 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 N = 298 Ps Country: USA Platform: Prolific Gender: 53.69% F Age: M = 38.10, SD = 12.64	Media legitimacy as determinant of consumer responses Between-subject experimental design: manipulation of the influencer's (vs. company's) loss of media legitimacy	Causally test the effect of loss of media legitimacy on consumer responses
Study 5b N = 301 Ps Country: USA Platform: Prolific Gender: 57.14% F Age: M = 40.48, SD = 13.13	Evidence on the mechanism Between-subject experimental design: manipulation of the influencer's (vs. company's) loss of media legitimacy	Investigate a series of potential mediators that can explain the relationship between loss of media legitimacy and consumer responses
Study 6a 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	Regaining media legitimacy Between-subject experimental design: manipulation of the remedial strategy	Explore remedial strategies employed by influencers and show their effect on media legitimacy following a transgression
Study 6b N = 361 Ps (final sample N = 302) Country: USA, UK Platform: Prolific Gender: 64.27% F Age: M = 39.87, SD = 13.66	Improving consumer responses Between-subject experimental design: manipulation of the remedial strategy	Explore remedial strategies employed by influencers and show their effect on consumer responses following a transgression

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 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 et al., 2024; Latinovic & 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 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.

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

Table 2 Study 1 results

Variables	Model 1:	Model 2:	Model 3:	Model 4:
DV=Tweet				
Sentiment	OLS	Clustered error at user level	Covariates at user level	Fixed effects at user level
Influencer (vs. company)	0.0853 (0.0205) 0.000	0.0853 (0.0283) 0.003	0.0984 (0.0264) 0.000	0.1458 (0.0376) 0.000
Post	-0.0638 (0.0249) 0.010	-0.0638 (0.0310) 0.040	-0.0421 (0.0338) 0.213	0.0444 (0.0421) 0.291
Influencer × post	-0.0974 (0.0251) 0.000	-0.0974 (0.0314) 0.002	-0.1195 (0.0341) 0.000	-0.1433 (0.0423) 0.001
Gender				
Male vs. female			-0.0063 (0.0048) 0.189	
Unknown vs. female			0.0316 (0.0071) 0.000	
Country of origin			-0.0227 (0.0051) 0.000	
Number of followers			1.95e-08 (1.48e-08) 0.188	
Constant	0.0607 (0.0204) 0.003	0.0607 (0.0281) 0.031	0.0687 (0.0267) 0.010	-0.0403 (0.0373) 0.280

Errors are in parentheses; p -values are in bold

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

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 (304 M+ followers), and for the nonprominent influencer, we chose Rachel Zeilic (114 K 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; 23 M followers, \$17.8B in revenue, 52,000 employees) and Oribe (nonprominent; 478 K followers, \$112.6 M 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/flhj2-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; $\alpha_{\text{influencer}} = 0.98$; $M_{\text{influencer}} = 3.03$, $SD = 1.94$; eigenvalue = 3.75; $\alpha_{\text{company}} = 0.98$; $M_{\text{company}} = 3.15$, $SD = 1.96$; 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 ($\alpha_{\text{influencer}} = 0.92$; $M_{\text{influencer}} = 2.02$, $SD = 1.03$, eigenvalue = 3.26; $\alpha_{\text{company}} = 0.94$; $M_{\text{company}} = 2.11$, $SD = 1.15$, 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. $M_{\text{control}} = 2.04$; $F(2, 298) = 0.15$, $p = .86$, $\eta^2 = 0.001$). 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. $M_{\text{control}} = 1.88$; $F(2, 298) = 3.07$, $p = .048$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$). However, while there was a significant difference between company's financial resource advantage and control ($\text{delta} = 0.37$, $SE = 0.16$, 95% CI = [0.05, 0.69]) and a significant difference between influencer's financial resource advantage and control ($\text{delta} = 0.32$, $SE = 0.16$, 95% CI = [0.01, 0.64]), there was no difference between influencer's and company's financial resource advantages ($\text{delta} = -0.04$, $SE = 0.16$, 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 Stäbler 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 & Clelland, 2004; Deephouse, 1996; Pollock & Rindova, 2003). The outcome of this legitimization 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 & 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 et al., 2025; Davlembayeva et al., 2025). This bond of identification is built, among others, on perceptions of empathy, fairness, and credibility (Davlembayeva et al., 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 (Bitekline, 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 & 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 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

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 ($b = 1.884, p < .001$).

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 $ps > 0.10$). The model’s adjusted probability of focusing on the influencer was 0.54 ($SE = 0.04$, 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% ($z = 2.01$, $p = .022$, one-tailed, $h = 0.23$).

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 et al., 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.

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 et al. (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

Table 3 Topic modeling and interpretation

Topic	Interpretation	Top 15 Words	Illustrative Quotes
Focus on Influencer			
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 corporate 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>

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 et al., 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 (Deephouse, 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 ($\alpha_{\text{influencer}} = 0.97$; $M_{\text{influencer}} = 2.07$, $SD=1.20$, eigenvalue=3.63; $\alpha_{\text{company}} = 0.98$; $M_{\text{company}} = 2.28$, $SD=1.32$, 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. $M_{\text{influencer-focus company}} = 2.25$; $F(1, 296)=7.08$, $p=.008$, $\eta^2=0.02$). 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. $M_{\text{company-focus influencer}} = 2.39$; $F(1, 296)=1.93$, $p=.17$, $\eta^2=0.006$). 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 1 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 ($\alpha = 0.96$; $M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.51$; 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 Moiseiev et al. (2020; $\alpha = 0.95$; $M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.81$; eigenvalue = 3.47). To measure (4) identification ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.87$) we adopted the procedure from Aron et al. (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 [Hayes, 2018]). The reduced media legitimacy of the influencer (vs. company) has a negative and significant effect on identification ($b = -0.55$, $t = -2.60$, $p = .010$, $d = -0.30$), and identification has a positive and significant effect on attitude ($b = 0.29$, $t = 6.49$, $p < .001$), leading to a significant indirect negative effect. Thus, identification emerged as an underlying mechanism ($ab = -0.16$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% $CI = [-0.30, -0.04]$). The independent variable has no effect on journalists’ self-serving motives ($b = 0.20$, $t = 1.02$, $p = .31$, $d = 0.12$), accountability ($b = 0.24$, $t = 1.67$, $p = .10$, $d = 0.19$), or gloating ($b = 0.24$, $t = 1.15$, $p = .25$, $d = 0.13$). Overall, we find no significant indirect effect of influencer’s (vs. company’s) loss of media legitimacy on attitudes through journalists’ self-serving motives ($ab = 0.01$, $SE = 0.01$, 95% $CI = [-0.02, 0.04]$), accountability ($ab = 0.02$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% $CI = [-0.02, 0.06]$), or gloating ($ab = 0.04$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% $CI = [-0.03, 0.13]$). The overall direct effect was also not significant ($b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.16$, $t = 0.25$, $p = .80$). Figure 1 illustrates the results of the parallel mediation model.

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

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.

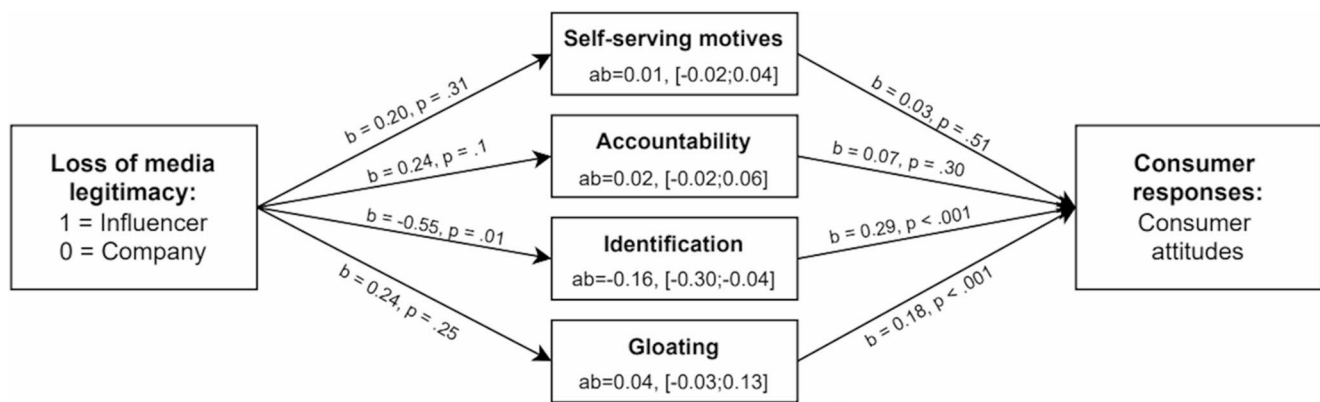


Fig. 1 Results of parallel mediation

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 ($F(2, 222)=3.45$, $p=.034$, $\eta^2=0.03$). 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 ($b_{\text{favorable vs. critical}} = -0.74$, $SE = 0.35$, $t = -2.12$, $p = .035$, $d=0.36$). Similarly, journalists expressed a significantly greater willingness to legitimize the influencer in the critical journalist condition compared to the social media story condition ($b_{\text{story vs. critical}} = -0.78$, $SE = 0.32$, $t = -2.40$, $p = .017$, $d=0.38$; see Fig. 2).

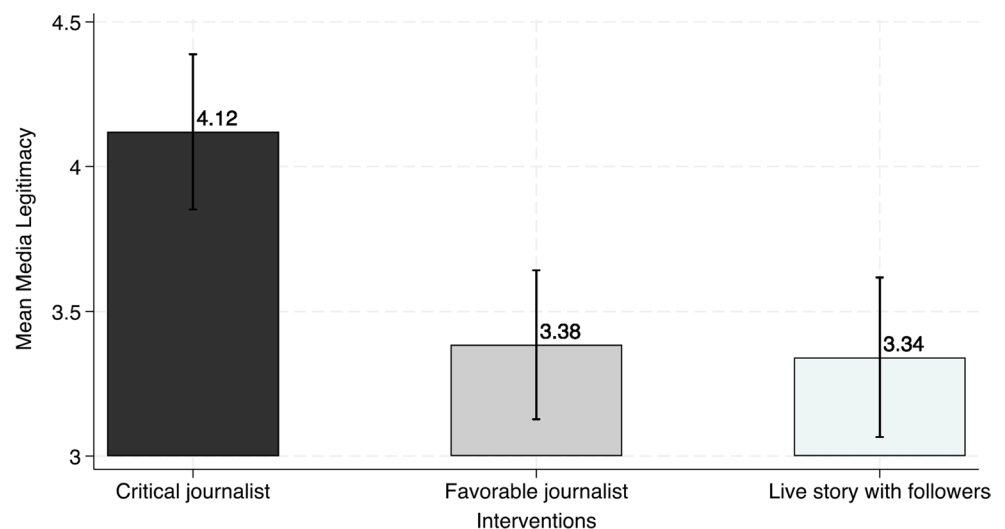
Discussion Overall, the results of Study 6a show that journalists are more willing to restore the media legitimacy of influencers when the influencer chooses to respond by placing themselves under the scrutiny of a journalist who has been typically critical toward them.

Study 6b: Improving consumer responses

Participants and method We recruited 361 participants (64.27% female, 35.18% male, <1% other or not disclosing, $M_{\text{age}} = 39.87$ 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>).

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

Fig. 2 Media legitimacy by intervention



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 proxy for consumer responses (scale from Study 2a; $\alpha = 0.95$; $M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.30$; 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 ($F(2, 299) = 3.30$, $p = .038$, $\eta^2 = 0.022$). 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 ($b_{\text{story vs. critical}} = -0.41$, $SE = 0.17$, $t = -2.43$, $p = .016$, $d = 0.33$). Attitudes in the favorable journalist

condition did not differ significantly from either the critical journalist condition ($b_{\text{favorable vs. critical}} = -0.08$, $SE = 0.18$, $t = -0.44$, $p = .66$, $d = 0.06$) or social media story condition, although the latter comparison was marginal ($b_{\text{story vs. favorable}} = -0.33$, $SE = 0.18$, $t = -1.89$, $p = .06$, $d = 0.27$; see Fig. 3).

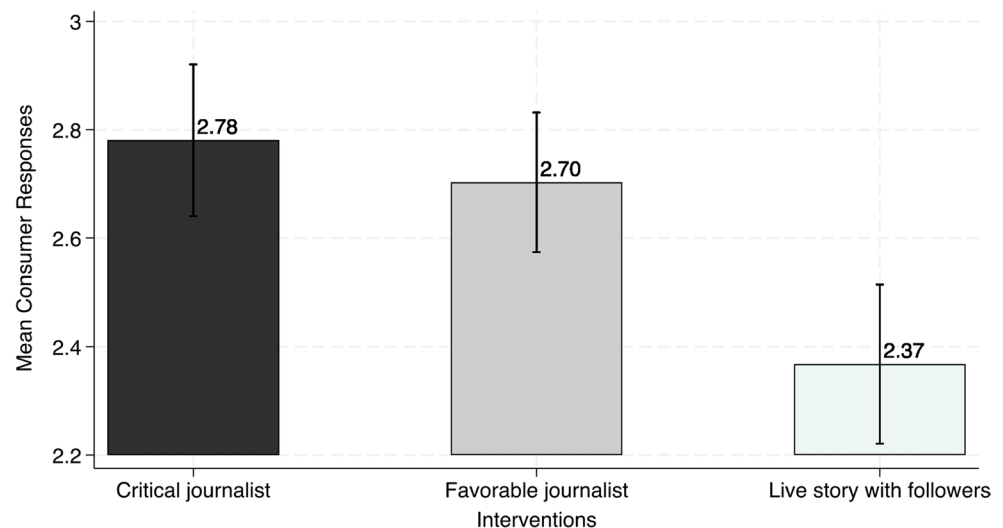
Discussion Consumer responses are more positive when the influencer intervenes through an interview with a critical journalist. Even an interview with a favorable journalist partially restores positive consumer evaluations, whereas directly addressing followers on social media is the least effective 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.

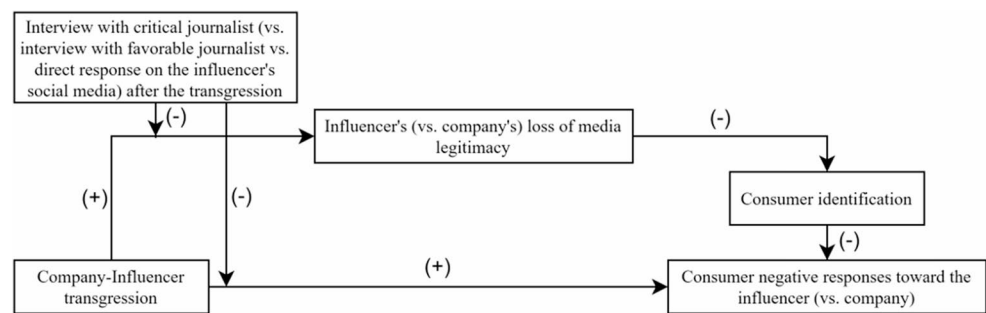
We demonstrate that, in company-influencer transgressions, the media tends to scrutinize influencers, subjecting them to harsher criticism than the companies involved. This loss of media legitimacy, in turn, leads consumers

Fig. 3 Consumer responses by intervention



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.

to respond more negatively toward influencers. We argue that this occurs because consumers identify more strongly with influencers than with companies; when influencers are

Fig. 4 Conceptual framework

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).

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 & 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 et al., 2020) and how brands can strategically optimize collaborations with influencers (see e.g., Lanz et al., 2024; Tian et al., 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; Stäbler & 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 et al., 2020) or influencer (see e.g., von Mettenheim & 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 et al., 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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Declarations

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Ethical approval All studies comply with ethical standards. Ethical approval was received from the University of Leeds.

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