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Bad Buzz by association: understanding and managing the impact of influencer scandals on the brand equity, brand image and consumer trust of associated brands

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Abstract

Influencer marketing has become a central pillar of brand communication, but the individuals who drive it also expose brands to reputational risk when they become involved in public scandals. This thesis investigates how influencer scandals affect the brand image, brand equity and consumer trust of associated brands, and examines two potential moderators: brand-influencer fit and the brand's crisis response strategy. Drawing on the concepts of guilt by association, scandal spillover, and situational crisis communication theory, three hypotheses were developed and tested using a mixed-methods design. A quantitative survey (N = 195) exposed respondents to fictional scenarios involving a fictitious brand (Lumio) and influencer (Alex), varying the strength of brand-influencer fit and the speed and authenticity of the brand's response, complemented by two semi-structured interviews with influencer marketing professionals in Belgium.

Results show partial support for the negative spillover effect of influencer scandals: purchase caution and, to a lesser extent, brand trust were affected, while brand equity held stable. Brand-influencer fit produced a mixed, partly reversed pattern, it amplified purchase caution as expected, but seemed to protect brand trust and equity rather than erode them further, a finding that directly challenges what both interviewed professionals assumed. Response strategy proved to be the strongest and most consistent factor, robust to correction for multiple comparisons: a rapid, authentic response substantially reduced reputational damage across all three dependent variables. These findings suggest that, while brands cannot fully prevent influencer misconduct, crisis response readiness represents the most controllable and effective lever available to limit reputational fallout.

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Declaration of AI Use

In the course of writing this thesis, I made use of an artificial intelligence tool (Claude, developed by Anthropic) to assist with the rephrasing of certain sentences and the correction of spelling and grammatical errors. All content, ideas, analysis and findings presented in this work remain the product of my own research and personal reflection.

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1 Introduction

Every brand wants to create a buzz. Nobody plans for the swarm. This is precisely the idea behind the title of this thesis, Bad Buzz by Association: Understanding and Managing the Impact of Influencer Scandals on the Brand Equity, Brand Image and Consumer Trust of Associated Brands: the buzz a brand works so hard to build can turn against it, not necessarily because of anything the brand itself did, but simply because of who it chose to stand next to.

Influencer marketing has become one of the most important tools available to brands today. What started as a handful of bloggers sharing product recommendations has grown into a multi-billion-euro industry, where a single post, video or story can shape how millions of people perceive a brand. Yet this power carries a risk brands do not always anticipate: influencers are individuals, and individuals sometimes make mistakes, say the wrong thing, or become caught up in full-blown public scandals. When that happens, the consequences rarely stay contained to the influencer alone.

This thesis is about that moment, when an influencer's misconduct starts to reflect back on the brand that chose to work with them. Cases such as James Charles and Morphe, or Logan Paul and his sponsors, show that the reputational fallout of an influencer scandal can extend well beyond the individual at its centre, damaging the trust, image and value of brands that had no direct involvement in what went wrong. This phenomenon, often described in the literature as guilt by association, raises questions that are both theoretically interesting and highly practical: why does this spillover happen, what makes some brands more vulnerable to it than others, and, perhaps most importantly, what can brands actually do to protect themselves?

This last question is what motivated this thesis. Beyond its academic contribution, the goal was to help brands understand this situation more clearly, going beyond isolated news stories and gut-feeling reactions to offer a structured way of thinking about why guilt by association happens, what makes it worse, and what brands can do about it, useful not only to fellow academics but to brand managers, marketing agencies, and influencers themselves.

Three hypotheses were developed, drawing on guilt by association, brand-influencer fit, and brand crisis management. The first examines whether exposure to an influencer scandal negatively affects consumers' brand trust, purchase caution and brand equity. The second investigates whether brand-influencer fit, the perceived compatibility between a brand and

an influencer, moderates the strength of this effect. The third explores whether the brand's response strategy, specifically its speed and perceived authenticity, can limit the reputational damage once a scandal occurs.

To test these hypotheses, this thesis adopts a mixed-methods approach: a quantitative survey among 195 consumers, using fictional scenarios involving a fictitious brand and influencer to isolate the effects studied without bias from pre-existing brand attitudes, complemented by two semi-structured interviews with influencer marketing professionals, offering a practitioner-level perspective that allows the statistical results to be interpreted with more nuance.

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on influencer marketing, brand equity, brand image, consumer trust, and crisis communication, and identifies the research gap. Section 3 presents the mixed methodology. Section 4 reports the survey and interview results. Section 5 discusses these results and outlines practical takeaways for brands. Section 6 covers the limitations and future research avenues. Section 7 concludes the thesis.

2 Literature review

2.1 Influencer Marketing and Brand-Consumer Relationships

2.1.1 Definition of influencer

Defining what an influencer is constitutes an essential starting point for this thesis, especially given the relatively recent emergence of this profession and its central role in the topic under study. One of the earliest academic definitions is provided by Freberg et al. (2011, p.90), who describe influencers as "a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and other social media platforms." Building on this perspective,De Veirman et al. (2017) define influencers as individuals capable of shaping consumers' perceptions and brand attitudes through their perceived credibility and reach.

In line with these academic views, the Cambridge Dictionary describes an influencer as "a person active on social media who is able to influence people's opinions or to persuade them to follow a particular lifestyle or buy a particular product" (Cambridge Dictionary, nd). Together, these definitions highlight the influencer's role as a persuasive communicator whose credibility, visibility and online presence enable them to affect consumer attitudes and behaviors.

2.1.2 Why do brands use influencers ?

Brands increasingly rely on influencer marketing as a strategic communication tool in the digital era. Unlike traditional advertising, influencer marketing enables brands to reach highly targeted audiences through individuals who have already established strong and ongoing relationships with their followers. According to De Veirman et al. (2017), influencers matter to brands mainly because of their reach and the trust people place in them, which lets them shape how consumers see a brand. Their personal, relatable way of communicating tends to make them more persuasive than traditional advertising.

Kim and Ko (2012) show that influencer marketing boosts brand awareness, engagement and purchase intention, largely because social media pushes people to actually participate, following, commenting, sharing, instead of just passively consuming content. Schouten et al. (2020) add that authenticity and relatability are what really drive this, since influencers tend to come across as more genuine than classic advertising, and that authenticity builds the kind of emotional connection that makes their recommendations feel sincere rather than salesy.

As a result, brands increasingly build influencers into their communication strategies, not just to get more visibility, but to build trust, improve brand image, and ultimately shape how consumers actually behave. The combination of credibility, authenticity, and audience engagement positions influencers as powerful intermediaries between brands and consumers, making influencer marketing a key component of modern brand communication.

2.1.3 Importance of credibility and authenticity

The effectiveness of influencer marketing largely depends on the perceived credibility and authenticity of influencers. Credibility is a key factor in persuasion, as highlighted by Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model, which suggests that individuals are more likely to be influenced by sources they perceive as trustworthy and expert. In the context of influencer marketing, De Veirman et al. (2017) argue that influencers' perceived credibility significantly shapes consumers' attitudes toward brands. Schouten et al. (2020) add that credibility boosts endorsement effectiveness by increasing trust and identification with the influencer, and more recent research confirms credibility remains a key factor online, especially as consumers turn to sources that feel more like peers than traditional advertisers (Sokolova and Perez, 2021).

Authenticity also plays a major role in shaping consumer reactions. Based on Goffman's

(1959) work on impression management, authenticity affects how sincere and genuine people appear in social interactions. On social media, influencers who seem authentic tend to build stronger emotional connections with their followers, which Lou and Yuan (2019) link to increased trust and purchase intention. Recent studies further highlight that authenticity enhances parasocial interactions, reinforcing the bond between influencers and their audiences (Sokolova and Perez, 2021). Together, these findings show that authenticity is a key component of influencer effectiveness, as it fosters trust, emotional engagement and persuasive impact.

Because credibility and authenticity shape how followers interpret an influencer's recommendations, they also influence how consumers perceive the brands promoted by that influencer. When credibility is high, brand evaluations tend to be more positive, whereas a loss of credibility can weaken these perceptions.

2.1.4 The concept of Brand influencer fit

Brand–influencer fit refers to the perceived compatibility between a brand and the influencer who promotes it, essentially how coherent the influencer's image, values, content, audience and lifestyle appear relative to the brand they endorse. Schouten et al. (2020) identify product-endorser fit as a key driver of endorsement effectiveness, since consumers judge whether the person promoting a product actually seems appropriate and credible for it, meaning a collaboration tends to be more persuasive when the influencer matches both the brand and the product.

Fit is closely tied to credibility and authenticity. Lou and Yuan (2019) show that influencer credibility shapes how much consumers trust branded content, so a coherent collaboration reads as more authentic, while a weak or forced fit can make audiences doubt the sincerity of the endorsement, which matters a lot given that influencer marketing largely relies on consumers believing the influencer genuinely likes or uses the product. De Veirman et al. (2017) add that things like follower count and how well the influencer matches the product also affect brand attitudes, so brands probably shouldn't pick influencers just because they're popular, fit with the brand's positioning and audience matters too. Che et al. (2025) take this a step further, splitting fit into functional fit (is the influencer relevant to the product category) and image fit (does their personality and lifestyle actually align with the brand's identity), and find both types affect how consumers judge the brand.

Fit matters even more once a scandal is involved, because it's basically what determines

how strongly people see the brand and influencer as linked. A strong fit usually helps the collaboration work better, since the influencer comes across as a credible face for the brand, but that same strength becomes a liability if the influencer messes up: consumers are more likely to connect the misconduct straight back to the brand's image and values. This is where guilt by association comes in, the idea that negative meanings tied to an influencer can rub off on the brand when the two are closely linked, which is exactly what Kunz et al. (2025) found in their study, negative meanings really do transfer from influencers to the brands they work with. So brand-influencer fit cuts both ways: it can boost credibility, image and trust, but it also leaves the brand more exposed if things go wrong, which is why it's not just a marketing question but a risk-management one too.

For this thesis, brand-influencer fit is defined as the perceived compatibility between a brand and an influencer in terms of image, values, audience, lifestyle and product relevance. A strong fit may amplify the positive effects of a collaboration, but it may also intensify guilt by association if the influencer's misconduct is seen as inconsistent with the brand's values or public image. Since credibility, authenticity and fit all shape how audiences interpret brand messages, the next section turns to the constructs most likely to be affected when an influencer becomes involved in a controversy: brand image, brand equity and consumer trust.

2.2 Brand image, Brand equity, and consumer trust

2.2.1 Definition of Brand equity

Brand equity refers to the value that a brand adds to a product or service from the consumer's perspective. According to Aaker (1991), brand equity consists of a set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand that can enhance or diminish the value provided by a product or service. Similarly, Keller (1993) defines brand equity as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer responses to marketing activities, emphasizing how familiarity and associations shape consumer behaviour. Kapferer (2012) further highlights that brand equity reflects the strength of the brand in consumers' minds, particularly through perceptions, associations and loyalty. Taken together, these perspectives show that brand equity represents the added value a brand provides through consumer perceptions, accumulated knowledge and emotional connections.

2.2.2 Definition of Brand image

Brand image refers to the set of perceptions and associations that consumers hold about a brand. Keller (1993) defines brand image as the perceptions of a brand as reflected by the associations stored in consumers' memory. Similarly, Aaker (1991) describes brand image as the network of associations linked to a brand that consumers retain in their minds. Kapferer (2012) adds that brand image reflects how a brand is perceived through various elements such as its identity, values and communication. Taken together, these perspectives show that brand image represents the mental representation of a brand formed through consumers' experiences, perceptions and associations.

2.2.3 Definition of Consumer trust

Consumer trust refers to the willingness of consumers to rely on a brand based on the expectation that it will deliver on its promises. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) define brand trust as the willingness of the average consumer to rely on a brand's ability to perform its stated function. Similarly, Delgado-Ballester (2004) describes consumer trust as the confident expectations consumers hold regarding a brand's reliability and intentions. Morgan and Hunt (1994) further emphasize that trust is a central element in relationship marketing, as it supports the development of long-term relationships between consumers and brands. Overall, consumer trust can be understood as consumers' confidence in a brand's reliability, integrity and ability to meet their expectations.

Even though brand image, consumer trust and brand equity describe different aspects of how consumers relate to a brand, they are closely connected. A change in one of these elements can easily influence the others. This makes it important not only to distinguish between them, but also to understand how they interact, especially when external events have the potential to disrupt consumer perceptions.

2.2.4 Difference and similarity between brand image, brand equity and consumer trust

Although brand image, brand equity and consumer trust are closely related concepts, they represent distinct aspects of consumer–brand relationships. All three constructs are rooted in consumers' perceptions and experiences with a brand (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Previous research suggests that these variables are interconnected, as a positive brand image can enhance consumer trust, which in turn contributes to stronger brand equity (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001).

However, these concepts differ in their focus and scope. Brand image refers to the set of associations and perceptions held in consumers' memory Keller (1993), making it primarily cognitive in nature. Consumer trust, by contrast, reflects a psychological state based on confidence in a brand's reliability and intentions (Delgado-Ballester, 2004), emphasizing a relational and emotional dimension. Brand equity is a broader construct that represents the overall value of a brand, resulting from multiple elements including brand image, trust, awareness and loyalty (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993).

Building on Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) models, a shift in brand image can be understood as one of the first reactions consumers have when something affects how they perceive a brand. This suggests that changes in brand image can trigger a chain reaction: when brand image becomes more negative, this can reduce the level of trust consumers place in the brand, and lower trust then weakens brand equity, since trust supports loyalty, perceived quality and positive associations.

While brand image is primarily cognitive in nature, referring to associations stored in memory, Keller's (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity model also identifies brand responses, the judgments and behaviours consumers form on the basis of these associations, as a stage through which brand image translates into observable consumer reactions. This suggests that a shift in brand image can be expected to manifest not only as a change in how consumers describe or evaluate a brand, but also as a change in their behavioural intentions toward it. In the context of influencer scandals specifically, Reinikainen et al. (2021) show that influencer transgressions can indirectly affect purchase intention through their impact on brand attitude and brand trust. Building on this, purchase caution, understood as consumers' behavioural reluctance to buy from a brand, can be treated as a downstream, behavioural indicator of a shift in brand image, complementing the more purely cognitive and evaluative measures of trust and equity discussed above.

Since these constructs are linked, brand equity models offer a helpful way to understand how they interact. The frameworks developed by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) explain how brand image and trust contribute to the overall value of a brand, and why negative events can weaken several dimensions at once. These models therefore provide a foundation for analyzing how influencer scandals may affect brands.

2.2.5 The Aaker Model

David Aaker (1991) proposed one of the most influential models of brand equity, defining it as a set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand that add to or subtract from the value provided to both consumers and firms. According to Aaker (1991), brand equity is composed of several key dimensions, including brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty and other proprietary brand assets.

Brand awareness refers to consumers' ability to recognize and recall a brand, while brand associations represent the meanings and perceptions linked to the brand in consumers' memory. Perceived quality reflects consumers' judgments about a product's overall excellence or superiority, and brand loyalty refers to the attachment and commitment that customers develop toward a brand. Together, these dimensions create value by enhancing consumer confidence, differentiating the brand from competitors and influencing purchase decisions.

Aaker's (1991) model highlights that brand equity is not a single construct but a multidimensional concept built through consumers' experiences and perceptions. This framework is particularly relevant in the context of influencer marketing, as factors such as brand image, trust and consumer perceptions, often shaped by influencers, can directly affect the different dimensions of brand equity.

The relationships between these constructs can be summarised as a simple sequence. When brand image becomes less positive, this tends to reduce the level of trust consumers place in the brand. Lower trust then weakens brand equity, since trust supports loyalty, perceived quality and positive associations. This means that brand image influences trust, and trust in turn influences brand equity, creating a chain that helps explain how consumer perceptions evolve.

2.2.6 The Keller model

Keller (1993) introduced the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, which defines brand equity as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer responses to marketing activities. Brand knowledge consists of two components: brand awareness, consumers' ability to recognize and recall a brand, and brand image, the associations and perceptions linked to the brand in consumers' memory. Keller (1993) further represents this through a hierarchical pyramid model, moving from brand identity and brand meaning to brand responses and, ultimately, brand resonance, the deep psychological bond and loyalty between consumer and

brand.

This model emphasizes that brand equity is constructed from the consumer's perspective, shaped by how consumers think, feel and behave toward a brand. In influencer marketing, influencers can shape brand knowledge by influencing both brand awareness and brand image, as well as consumers' emotional responses and engagement with the brand.

Because brand image, trust and brand equity influence one another, the frameworks proposed by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) help explain why negative events can weaken several dimensions of a brand at once, and why brands are particularly sensitive to controversies involving their endorsers. This sensitivity is especially relevant when brands collaborate with influencers, since an influencer's behaviour shapes how audiences interpret the brand: if the influencer faces criticism or controversy, the negative perceptions directed at them may spill over to the brand. This makes it necessary to examine how influencer scandals emerge and why they can have such a strong impact on associated brands.

2.3 Negative publicity and influencer scandals: A theoretical perspective

2.3.1 Definition of influencer scandals

Before getting into specific examples, it's worth clarifying what is actually meant by an influencer scandal. Broadly, it can be understood as a public controversy that arises when an influencer engages in behaviour or makes statements seen as morally, socially or professionally unacceptable. This matters because influencers aren't ordinary social media users: Freberg et al. (2011) describe them as independent third-party endorsers who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets and other social media content, which gives them a public role and real influence over how audiences think, behave and consume.

Influencers also rely heavily on trust and credibility. Lou and Yuan (2019) note that influencer marketing works partly because audiences see influencers as more credible, authentic and personally connected than traditional ads. So when an influencer ends up in a scandal, the damage isn't limited to the initial behaviour, it also hits their image and relationship with followers. If followers feel the influencer acted against the values or personality they portray online, this tends to bring disappointment, criticism and a loss of support.

A scandal usually kicks off with a specific incident, an offensive video, inappropriate behaviour, a racist or sexist comment, dishonesty, or a public falling-out with another influencer,

but it only turns into a full-blown scandal once it gets widely shared and discussed online. Social media is what drives that escalation, since audiences can react instantly through comments, unfollows, reaction videos and hashtags. So influencer scandals aren't just about the original transgression, they're also about how fast and how intensely the public reacts to it.

One well-known example is Logan Paul's 2017 controversy, when he uploaded a video filmed in Japan's Aokigahara forest showing the body of a person who had died by suicide. The video drew heavy criticism for being disrespectful and insensitive, and according to TIME (2018), the backlash was so strong partly because people felt Paul had turned suicide into entertainment. YouTube later removed him from Google Preferred and paused several of his projects, a reminder that these scandals can carry real professional and financial fallout (ABC News, 2018; TIME, 2018). Another example is the 2019 James Charles/Tati Westbrook controversy, which escalated fast after Westbrook posted a video criticizing Charles; ABC News (2019) reported he lost around 2.6 million subscribers in just three days. This case shows how quickly an influencer's reputation can collapse once audiences feel betrayed, and that scandals don't need to involve anything illegal, personal conflicts, accusations or a perceived lack of honesty are enough.

For this thesis, an influencer scandal is defined as a public controversy involving an influencer's perceived misconduct, amplified through social media, and leading to reputational, social, professional or financial consequences.

This matters for brands specifically: negative perceptions of an influencer can spill over onto the brands they're associated with, damaging brand image, lowering trust and weakening brand equity. Understanding how these elements interact is key to analysing the effects of influencer scandals.

That said, scandals don't depend only on the influencer's behaviour, their impact also hinges on how audiences react and get involved, since online environments can amplify reactions and turn isolated incidents into large-scale discussions. This dynamic is often described through the concept of cancel culture, which helps explain how scandals escalate and why they can become so damaging.

2.3.2 The definition of Cancel culture

Following on from the definition of influencer scandals, online cancel culture is a related concept that helps explain how audiences collectively react to perceived misconduct. Clark

(2020) describes it as a practice where people withdraw attention, support or resources from public figures whose actions or values are seen as unacceptable, so cancellation isn't just criticism, it's a deliberate act of distancing oneself from the person being criticized.

Cancel culture is closely tied to digital participation: Ng (2020) explains that it unfolds in online spaces where audiences actively debate controversial behaviour, responding through comments, shared content, reaction videos, hashtags, unfollowing or calls for boycotts. It can therefore be seen as a form of collective digital response in which audiences take part in judging and reacting to public misconduct. Its meaning is also debated: the Pew Research Center (2021) found that people define it differently depending on context, some see it as accountability, others as censorship or punishment, so there isn't one agreed-upon definition.

This is especially relevant to influencer scandals, since influencers depend heavily on audience attention, visibility and support. When that support drops after a perceived transgression, their reputation and public image take a real hit, echoing Clark (2020)'s point about withdrawal of support and Ng (2020)'s emphasis on active online participation.

For this thesis, online cancel culture is defined as a collective online reaction in which audiences publicly criticize and withdraw attention, support or resources from a public figure following behaviour perceived as unacceptable, drawing on Clark's (2020) emphasis on withdrawal of support, Ng's (2020) discussion of digital participation, and the Pew Research Center's (2021) finding that it is read both as accountability and as punishment.

While cancel culture explains how audiences collectively respond to perceived misconduct, it doesn't fully explain why brands sometimes get pulled into the controversy. That's where the idea of guilt by association comes in, describing how negative perceptions of an influencer can transfer to the brands they work with.

2.3.3 Notion of guilt by association

The notion of guilt by association is important in this thesis because it explains how a brand can be negatively affected by the behaviour of an influencer with whom it is publicly connected. In the context of influencer marketing, this phenomenon is often described through the idea of scandal spillover. Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020) argue that the relationship between a brand and a social media influencer can make the brand vulnerable to spillover effects when the influencer engages in deviant or inappropriate behaviour. This means that the negative consequences of the scandal may not remain limited to the influencer but can

extend to the associated brand.

This risk is also linked to the transfer of meaning between influencers and brands. Kunz et al. (2025) show that consumers can transfer meanings associated with influencers to the brands they endorse. Their study demonstrates that when influencers are associated with negative attributes, these meanings can influence how consumers evaluate the endorsed brand. This supports the idea that a brand may be judged negatively because of the public image or behaviour of the influencer it collaborates with.

Recent research further shows that influencer scandals can create direct consequences for partner brands. Dolan et al. (2025) explain that such scandals can lead to negative brand engagement, meaning that consumers may react negatively not only toward the influencer but also toward the connected brand. Their findings also suggest that the brand's response plays a crucial role, particularly when it is perceived as authentic and occurs quickly after the scandal.

Wilson et al. (2026) similarly show that influencer scandals can negatively affect the brands or products endorsed by the influencer. They argue that brands should consider several factors when responding to a scandal, including the influencer's level of responsibility, the seriousness of the transgression, the nature of the endorsement and the influencer's own response. This highlights that guilt by association is not only a reputational risk but also a crisis-management challenge for brands.

For this thesis, guilt by association is defined as a reputational risk in which a brand is negatively evaluated because of its public connection to an influencer involved in a scandal. This definition draws on recent research showing that influencer scandals can create scandal spillover, negative meaning transfer and negative brand engagement for associated brands (Dolan et al., 2025; Kintu and Ben-Slimane, 2020; Kunz et al., 2025; Wilson et al., 2026).

Because guilt by association creates a link between the influencer's behaviour and the brand's reputation, it becomes essential to examine how this spillover affects brand outcomes. The following section therefore explores the specific consequences that influencer scandals can have on brand image, consumer trust and brand equity.

2.3.4 Negative impact on brands

When an influencer becomes involved in a scandal, the negative perceptions directed at them can transfer to the brand, first affecting brand image, then consumer trust, and eventually

brand equity. Brands work with influencers for their visibility, credibility and audience relationships, but that same connection means an influencer's scandal can spill over onto the brand too. Wilson et al. (2026) note that while influencers are typically used to boost brand reach and consumer interest, scandals involving them can just as easily hurt the brands or products they endorse, so influencer partnerships bring reputational risk alongside their marketing upside.

One of the clearest effects is on brand attitude, how positively or negatively consumers evaluate the brand. Reinikainen et al. (2021) found that influencer betrayal can indirectly damage brand attitude, brand trust and purchase intention, meaning disappointment toward the influencer often bleeds into how consumers see the brand behind them. This ties directly into the guilt-by-association mechanism discussed earlier: Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020) describe this as scandal spillover, where backlash aimed at an influencer extends to the company connected to them, even when the brand had no direct role in what happened.

Trust takes a similar hit. Since consumers often rely on an influencer's perceived authenticity when judging the products they promote (Lou and Yuan, 2019), a loss of credibility after a scandal tends to weaken trust in the associated brand too, particularly when the influencer was chosen precisely for their personal image or closeness to their audience. Dolan et al. (2025) add that this can translate into negative brand engagement, especially once consumers have already "cancelled" (Dolan et al., 2025, p. 238) the influencer, though they find that brand forgiveness, perceived authenticity and a quick brand response can all help soften this effect. As covered in the cancel culture section, this backlash often plays out publicly on social media, with audiences pressuring the brand itself to respond, apologise or end the partnership, and how justified that pressure feels can shape how the brand's reaction is judged.

Purchase intention can drop as well: Reinikainen et al. (2021) link influencer transgressions to lower purchase intention through betrayal and brand-related outcomes, a pattern Carrillat et al. (2014) also found in celebrity endorsement, suggesting the same logic applies to influencers acting as brand endorsers. That said, not every scandal hits a brand the same way. Wilson et al. (2026) point out that the impact depends on the influencer's level of responsibility, how serious the transgression is, the type of endorsement relationship, and how the influencer themselves responds, with visible, long-term or identity-linked collaborations generally more exposed.

For this thesis, the negative impact of influencer scandals on brands is understood as the reputational, relational and commercial damage a brand may experience through its public

association with an influencer involved in a scandal, including damage to brand attitude, loss of consumer trust, negative brand engagement, audience backlash, reduced purchase intention and pressure to end the collaboration (Dolan et al., 2025; Reinikainen et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2026).

2.4 Brand crisis management, uncertainty management, and risk mitigation

2.4.1 Brand Crisis management

Brand crisis management is an important part of this thesis because influencer scandals can create reputational risks for the brands associated with them. It refers to the strategies an organization uses to respond to events that may damage its reputation or public image. Coombs (2007) explains that crisis communication protects reputational assets during a crisis and that organizations must adapt their response to the level of reputational threat, a point particularly relevant when an influencer a brand collaborates with becomes involved in public controversy.

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by Coombs (2007), suggests that the appropriate crisis response depends on how much responsibility stakeholders attribute to the organization: a limited response may suffice if the brand is seen as having little responsibility, whereas a stronger response is needed if consumers believe the brand should have known about the influencer's behaviour or made a poor partnership decision.

In influencer marketing, the difficulty is that the crisis often originates from an external partner rather than the brand itself. However, because the influencer publicly represents the brand through sponsored content, consumers may still associate the influencer's misconduct with the brand. Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020) explain that companies can experience scandal spillover when they are associated with a social media influencer involved in deviance or wrongdoing, meaning that crisis management becomes necessary even when the brand did not directly cause the scandal.

2.4.2 Uncertainty management

Uncertainty management matters in influencer-related crises because brands often have to decide quickly while the situation is still unclear, who's responsible, how serious it is, and how stakeholders will react, especially since these controversies tend to develop fast on social media, where public reaction can shift within hours.

Building on Coombs (2007)'s framework, brands face uncertainty about whether consumers will attribute responsibility solely to the influencer or partly to the brand too: if the brand is seen as partly responsible for choosing or supporting the influencer, a stronger response is likely needed, whereas a scandal viewed as unrelated to the brand may call for something more limited. There's also uncertainty around severity. Wilson et al. (2026) argue brands need to figure out how serious the transgression actually is, minor, temporary, or bad enough to hurt brand image and trust, and take into account how the influencer themselves reacts, whether they own up to it, apologise, deny it, or just go quiet, since that also shapes how the public responds.

This uncertainty changes how audiences behave too: Lee et al. (2021) find that when responsibility isn't clear, it stirs up stakeholders' emotions and pushes them to go looking for more information, following discussions, reading comments, scrutinising the brand's response more closely, which just increases public attention and makes the whole thing harder to control.

For brands, managing this comes down to monitoring the situation, gathering reliable information, and holding off on premature or unclear communication, since reacting too fast without the facts can look careless, but waiting too long can come across as indifference or even complicity. Dolan et al. (2025) find that acting quickly helps reduce negative brand engagement, though they stress perceived authenticity matters just as much, so brands really need to balance speed with accuracy and sincerity.

2.4.3 Risk mitigation before, during and after a scandal

Risk mitigation refers to the actions a brand takes to reduce the likelihood or severity of negative consequences. It matters in influencer marketing because brands can be hit by guilt by association, scandal spillover and negative audience reactions, so preparation should ideally start before a partnership even begins, not just after a scandal breaks.

Before a scandal, mitigation starts with influencer selection: brands should check whether the influencer's image, values, audience and past behaviour actually fit the brand, since Schouten et al. (2020) show that product-endorser fit, credibility and identification all drive endorsement effectiveness, meaning influencers shouldn't be picked on reach alone. Background checks and contractual protection add another layer here. Wilson et al. (2026) note that the structure of the partnership matters, a long-term ambassador role ties the brand to the influencer more closely than a one-off sponsored post, so brands should weigh the visibility and depth of a collaboration before committing, and build in contractual clauses that allow

them to suspend or end it if the influencer's behaviour later threatens their reputation.

Once a scandal hits, mitigation shifts to monitoring the situation and picking an appropriate response. Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020) identify several options, proactive dissociation, reactive dissociation, imitating other firms' response, or no response at all, with the right choice depending on how serious the scandal is and how much public pressure is building: dissociation tends to help when the scandal is serious and closely tied to the brand, while monitoring first may be wiser when the situation is still unclear. Communication plays a key role here too. Coombs (2007) argues that crisis responses should scale with how much responsibility consumers assign to the brand, whether that means clarifying values, expressing concern, pausing a campaign or explaining a decision, and Dolan et al. (2025) add that a quick, authentic response is particularly effective at reducing negative brand engagement.

After the scandal, the focus turns to rebuilding trust and protecting long-term brand equity, whether by communicating lessons learned, reviewing influencer selection processes, updating partnership policies or simply being more transparent going forward. Dolan et al. (2025) also point to the role of brand forgiveness, showing that consumers' willingness to forgive can itself reduce negative brand engagement, a reminder that this stage is as much about repairing the brand-consumer relationship as it is about closing out the scandal.

2.4.4 Theoretical frameworks for Brand responses

Brand response refers to how a brand reacts publicly and strategically once an associated influencer becomes involved in a scandal. Since consumers judge not just the influencer's misconduct but also how the brand handles the fallout, this response matters: as Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020) note, companies linked to an influencer involved in wrongdoing can experience scandal spillover, so how the brand reacts can determine whether negative attention stays on the influencer or extends to the brand's own image and credibility.

Brands basically have a few response options on the table, each with its own trade-offs. Silence is one of them: Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020) list absence of response as a fairly common reaction when a scandal is unclear, minor, or not really tied to the brand, though it's risky, since audiences expecting some kind of stance might read silence as indifference or even tacit support. Dissociation is another route, and Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020) split this into a proactive version, where the brand distances itself early, before backlash builds up, and a reactive one, which only comes once public pressure has already picked up. Timing changes how this lands: acting quickly tends to look responsible, while waiting can come

across as forced or purely strategic. Brands can also go further and suspend or end the partnership entirely. Wilson et al. (2026) suggest this decision should factor in how serious the transgression is, how responsible the influencer actually is, the nature of the endorsement, and how the influencer themselves reacts, so a full break makes sense for serious or values-conflicting scandals, while a temporary pause might do for lighter ones.

Beyond deciding whether to distance from or end a partnership, brands usually also communicate directly, through a statement, an apology, or some clarification of their values. Coombs (2007) argues crisis responses should scale with how much responsibility and reputational threat the brand is facing, meaning a brand seen as partly responsible for choosing or backing the influencer probably needs a stronger response to hold onto consumer trust. Tone matters a lot here too: Dolan et al. (2025) find that both perceived authenticity and speed of response help cut down negative brand engagement, while anything that comes off vague, defensive, or too commercial can backfire and deepen distrust instead. Corrective action, pulling campaign content, rethinking how influencers get vetted, updating partnership guidelines, reinforces all this by showing the brand is actually dealing with the issue and not just protecting its image.

Finally, how strong that brand-influencer relationship was in the first place also shapes what response makes sense. Wilson et al. (2026) point out that a one-off sponsored post creates a much weaker bond than a long-term ambassador role, so the more closely an influencer is tied to a brand's identity or campaigns, the stronger and more visible the response probably needs to be.

2.5 Research gap and development of hypotheses

2.5.1 Research Gap

Existing research has shown that influencer scandals can negatively affect associated brands through mechanisms such as scandal spillover, guilt by association, loss of consumer trust, negative brand engagement and reduced purchase intention. Recent studies also highlight that brand responses, including response timing, perceived authenticity, brand forgiveness and evaluations of the influencer's responsibility, shape how consumers react after a scandal. However, the literature remains fragmented. Most studies examine either the negative consequences of influencer scandals or specific aspects of brand response, without fully connecting these two perspectives.

As a result, less attention has been given to understanding how influencer scandals trigger changes in consumer perceptions, particularly regarding brand image, consumer trust and brand equity, and how brand response strategies can influence this process. Existing research rarely integrates the psychological mechanisms behind scandal spillover with the managerial decisions brands must make under uncertainty, nor does it explain how brand responses can mitigate or intensify the reputational impact of a scandal.

2.5.2 Development of Hypotheses

Building on the research gap identified above, three hypotheses were developed to guide the empirical part of this thesis. Each hypothesis draws directly on the theoretical concepts discussed in the literature review, namely guilt by association, brand-influencer fit and brand crisis management.

The first hypothesis addresses the core mechanism of scandal spillover. As shown by Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020), Kunz et al. (2025) and Dolan et al. (2025), influencer scandals can transfer negative perceptions to associated brands, affecting brand image, consumer trust and brand equity. Building on these findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: *Exposure to an influencer scandal negatively affects consumers' brand image, brand trust and brand equity, reflecting the idea of guilt by association.*

The second hypothesis focuses on the moderating role of brand-influencer fit. Schouten et al. (2020) and Che et al. (2025) show that the perceived compatibility between a brand and an influencer influences how consumers evaluate endorsements. As discussed in 2.1.4, a strong fit can increase endorsement effectiveness but may also intensify guilt by association when the influencer is involved in a scandal, as consumers may perceive the brand as more closely tied to the influencer's behaviour. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H2: *Brand-influencer fit moderates this effect, such that the negative impact of the scandal is stronger when the influencer's image closely matches the brand's image, since consumers may perceive the brand as more closely tied to the influencer's behaviour.*

The third hypothesis addresses the moderating role of brand response strategy. Coombs (2007) argues that crisis responses should be adapted to the level of reputational threat, while Dolan et al. (2025) show that immediacy and perceived authenticity can reduce negative brand engagement after an influencer scandal. Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020) further distinguish between proactive and reactive dissociation, highlighting that timing and sincerity

shape how consumers evaluate a brand's response. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H3: *The brand's response strategy moderates the negative impact of the scandal, such that a rapid and authentic response results in less damage to consumer trust and brand equity than a delayed or absent response.*

3 Mixed Methodology

3.1 Research Framework

Based on the literature review, three main ideas are combined into one framework: guilt by association, brand-influencer fit, and brand crisis management.

The starting point of the model is the influencer scandal itself. When an influencer is involved in a scandal, negative perceptions can transfer to the brand they are associated with. This is the core idea behind H1: the scandal is expected to negatively affect brand trust, purchase caution and brand equity, following the Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) models discussed earlier.

Two moderating variables are then added to this basic relationship, since the literature suggests that the negative effect of a scandal is not uniform across brands. The first is brand-influencer fit (H2): when the influencer's image closely matches the brand's, consumers may perceive the two as more connected, which could strengthen the negative effect. The second is the brand's response strategy (H3): a quick and honest reaction may limit the damage, while a slow or unclear one may worsen it.

3.2 Thought process

This research combines a quantitative online survey with semi-structured interviews conducted with two industry professionals. The two parts serve different but complementary purposes: the survey makes it possible to statistically test the three hypotheses across a large sample of consumers, while the expert interviews add a more practical, hands-on perspective from professionals working directly in influencer marketing. Together, they give a fuller picture of the phenomenon than either method could provide on its own.

3.3 Expert Interviews

3.3.1 Research Design and Data Collection

The interview data was collected through two semi-structured interviews conducted via Google Meet, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. The interviewees were selected for their professional expertise in influencer marketing: one is an influencer and freelancer with direct experience of brand collaborations, and the other is the co-founder of one of the largest influencer marketing agencies in Belgium. The goal was not to gather additional consumer perspectives but to obtain an informed, professional point of view on how brands manage influencer scandals in practice and which response strategies are considered most effective.

Each interview followed a structured interview guide (see Appendix), though the semi-structured format allowed flexibility to explore unexpected topics as they emerged. Interviews were recorded with participants' consent and fully transcribed, then analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns that could enrich and nuance the survey findings.

The results of both components are presented separately in the following sections before being integrated in the discussion, where the interview findings are used to contextualise, explain, and where relevant, challenge what the statistical analysis revealed.

3.3.2 Presentation of Interviewees

Two professionals were interviewed, selected to obtain complementary perspectives from both the influencer side and the brand management side.

The first interviewee, Chloé Vanbutsele, is a freelancer in influencer marketing and content creator, active in the field since 2023. Her work at the intersection of content creation and influencer marketing gives her a first-hand understanding of how brand-influencer collaborations work in practice, and how scandals affect both influencers and the brands they work with.

The second interviewee, Mathieu Santy, is co-founder of Mastr, one of the largest influencer marketing agencies in Belgium. With over ten years of experience across campaign management and influencer relationship management, he provides a strategic and managerial perspective on how brands handle partnerships and respond to crises.

Together, these two profiles capture both the human and operational dimensions of influencer marketing and crisis management: Vanbutsele from the influencer's vantage point, and Santy

from a broader industry perspective shaped by over a decade of managing campaigns across varied contexts.

3.4 Quantitative Approach

3.4.1 Research Design and Data Collection

The quantitative data was collected through an online survey distributed via social media and personal networks, gathering 195 responses from anonymous consumers. The survey was built around four fictional scenarios involving a fictitious brand, Lumio, and a fictional influencer, Alex, names chosen deliberately to avoid bias linked to pre-existing brand associations. Respondents reacted to each scenario on a 5-point Likert scale, measuring brand trust, purchase caution and brand equity under different conditions of brand-influencer fit and brand response strategy.

Brand trust items were adapted from Chaudhuri and Holbrook's (2001) conceptualisation of trust as willingness to rely on a brand's stated function, consistent with Delgado-Ballester (2004). Brand equity items reflect Aaker's (1991) and Keller's (1993) characterisation of equity as built through consumer perceptions, associations and evaluative judgments. Purchase caution served as a behavioural proxy for brand image: shifts in brand image are expected to manifest behaviourally as well as evaluatively (Keller 1993; Section 2.2.4), and influencer transgressions have been shown to affect purchase intention indirectly through brand attitude and trust (Reinikainen et al., 2021). As no validated scale for this specific construct was identified in the literature, these items were developed for this study.

For each construct and scenario, one item was worded in the opposite direction to the other two (e.g., *Trust_A2*, *Trust_B3*, *Trust_C3*, *Trust_D3*) to reduce acquiescence bias. These items were reverse-coded prior to analysis so that higher scores consistently reflected a stronger negative reaction, after which a composite score was computed for each construct and scenario as the mean of its three items. All analyses were conducted using SPSS.

3.4.2 Research Hypotheses and Variables

Each construct was measured using three items per scenario to ensure stronger internal consistency and more reliable measurement.

H1: Since all respondents were exposed to the scandal scenario (Scenario A), with no scandal-free control condition, this hypothesis is tested by examining whether respondents' composite

scores differ significantly from the neutral midpoint of the scale (3 on a 1 to 5 Likert scale), using one-sample t-tests. The dependent variables are brand trust, purchase caution (as a proxy for brand image), and brand equity.

H2: The moderating variable is brand-influencer fit, operationalised through two versions of the same scandal: Scenario A (high fit) and Scenario B (low fit). Since the same respondents answered both scenarios, this hypothesis is tested using paired-samples t-tests comparing brand trust, purchase caution and brand equity scores between the two conditions.

H3: The moderating variable is the brand's response strategy, operationalised through Scenario C (rapid, authentic response within 24 hours, ending the collaboration) and Scenario D (delayed or absent response). As with H2, the same respondents evaluated both scenarios, so this hypothesis is also tested using paired-samples t-tests on the same three dependent variables.

Table 1: Overview of measurement items per construct and scenario

Scenario	**Brand Trust**	**Purchase Caution**	**Brand Equity**
A (High fit)	Trust_A1	Caution_A1	Equity_A1
	Trust_A2	Caution_A2	Equity_A2
	Trust_A3	Caution_A3	Equity_A3
B (Low fit)	Trust_B1	Caution_B1	Equity_B1
	Trust_B2	Caution_B2	Equity_B2
	Trust_B3	Caution_B3	Equity_B3
C (Rapid response)	Trust_C1	Caution_C1	Equity_C1
	Trust_C2	Caution_C2	Equity_C2
	Trust_C3	Caution_C3	Equity_C3
D (Delayed response)	Trust_D1	Caution_D1	Equity_D1
	Trust_D2	Caution_D2	Equity_D2
	Trust_D3	Caution_D3	Equity_D3

Note: All items measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Prior to hypothesis testing, the internal consistency and discriminant validity of the scales were assessed (Sections 4.2.3 and 4.2.4), and the normality of paired differences underlying the H2 and H3 comparisons was checked using the Shapiro-Wilk test (Section 4.2.6). Given

that nine one-sample and paired-samples t-tests were conducted across H1, H2 and H3, the primary analyses are reported using uncorrected p-values, consistent with common practice in exploratory vignette-based survey research where hypotheses are theoretically pre-specified rather than derived from data mining. The robustness of these findings to correction for multiple comparisons is examined separately in Section 4.2.8.

4 Analysis and results

4.1 Interview Findings

4.1.1 Overview

To complement the quantitative results with a more grounded, professional perspective, two semi-structured interviews were conducted: one with Mathieu Santy, co-founder of the influencer marketing agency Mastr, and one with Chloé Vanbutsele, a freelance content creator and social media manager. These two profiles offer different angles on the same phenomenon: Santy speaks from the agency and brand-strategy side, Vanbutsele from the influencer's own experience of being on the receiving end of brand collaborations.

Four recurring themes came out of both transcripts: brand-influencer fit as a risk-management tool rather than a purely creative choice; how consumers assign responsibility to brands, tying back to guilt by association; the role of relationship depth in how much damage a scandal causes; and crisis response strategy, which turned out to be where the two interviewees agreed the most, and, as shown further down, also where the interview and survey findings line up best.

4.1.2 Brand-influencer fit as anticipatory risk management

Both interviewees agreed that brand-influencer fit has become a real risk-management tool, not just a matter of reach or creative alignment. Santy gave a concrete example: clients like Disney or Pokémon go through an influencer's recent content, usually the last three months, before greenlighting a campaign, requiring creators to be, as he put it, "Disney-proof." Vanbutsele made a similar point from the other side, describing a dating-app sponsorship she declined while in a relationship because it didn't fit her audience. This suggests fit isn't something brands decide unilaterally; influencers screen opportunities too.

These accounts echo the reasoning behind H2, though it's worth being precise: a stronger perceived compatibility between brand and influencer doesn't protect the brand if something

goes wrong, if anything it increases exposure.

4.1.3 Guilt by association and perceived brand responsibility

Both interviewees agreed that consumers partly hold a brand responsible for an influencer's misconduct, even when the brand had nothing to do with it. Vanbutsele put it directly: consumers assign the brand part of the blame simply because, as she said, "it does originate from the brand." This lines up with the guilt-by-association mechanism from the literature review (Kintu and Ben-Slimane, 2020; Kunz et al., 2025), which is what H1 is meant to test.

4.1.4 The moderating role of relationship depth

Both interviewees independently confirmed that long-term or highly visible partnerships (e.g., brand ambassadorships) amplify reputational risk compared to a one-off sponsored post. Vanbutsele summed it up: "if you've really worked long-term with a major sports brand as an ambassador, the impact on that brand is greater" than for a brand the influencer "may have only worked with once." This matches the logic behind H2 and suggests relationship duration could be worth adding as a moderating variable in future models.

4.1.5 Preventive and reactive risk mitigation

On the preventive side, Santy pointed to two industry tools: the Belgian "influencer certificate," a self-regulatory training programme giving creators "a foundation of all the existing rules" on ethics and legislation, and standard contracts that increasingly place responsibility on the creator, growing from "just a small clause" to "a full page" covering expected conduct. Vanbutsele made a similar point from a more personal angle, stressing the importance of a clear briefing "with clear guidelines on what may and may not be said" so the influencer "definitely knows what the brand stands for" before the collaboration starts.

On the reactive side, both interviewees agreed that speed and clarity help limit the damage once a scandal breaks, but that the response still needs to match the seriousness of the situation and the evidence available. This echoes Coombs' (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory and fits with the reasoning behind H3.

4.1.6 Insights from the Morphe/James Charles simulation

When asked about the Morphe/James Charles case, both interviewees agreed Morphe's delayed response was a mistake, though neither thought the partnership should have ended

immediately; a faster, non-final statement distancing the brand would have limited the damage. They also noted that the strength of the Morphe-James Charles relationship, built around a signature product and an ambassador-level partnership, made the backlash worse once it hit, fitting with the H2 reasoning on fit and relationship depth. Santy added that rebuilding trust after such an episode is rarely simple: "it's often underestimated just how hard it is to regain trust."

4.1.7 Key Takeaways from the Interviews

Overall, the two interviews give a practitioner's view that lines up with the conceptual model behind the survey: influencer scandals are seen as transferring reputational risk onto associated brands, this risk is thought to worsen when brand-influencer fit is strong, and a fast, proportionate and transparent response is seen as limiting, though never fully erasing, the damage. As interview findings rather than a dedicated research method, they cannot confirm or reject H1, H2 and H3 on their own, but they show that industry professionals already treat brand-influencer fit and crisis-response timing as deliberate risk-management levers, without necessarily framing this in terms of Aaker's (1991) and Coombs' (2007) theoretical frameworks.

4.2 Quantitative research

4.2.1 Sample Description

The final sample consisted of $N195$ respondents. In terms of gender, 56.9% of respondents identified as female and 43.1% as male. The sample was predominantly young, with 43.1% aged between 18 and 24 and 32.3% aged between 25 and 34; smaller proportions were aged 35–44 (12.3%), 45–54 (8.2%), under 18 (2.1%), or 55 and above (2.1%).

Regarding social media behaviour, the vast majority of respondents reported frequent social media use, with 46.2% using social media very often and 39.0% often, while only a small minority reported rare (3.1%) or no (0.5%) use. Exposure to influencer content followed a similar pattern, with 37.4% of respondents encountering influencer content often, 24.1% very often, and 26.2% sometimes. A large majority of respondents (75.4%) reported having discovered a brand through an influencer, and 56.9% reported having purchased, or considered purchasing, a product based on an influencer's recommendation. Attention paid to brand-influencer collaborations was moderate on average ($M = 2.75$, $Mdn = 3$, $Mode = 3$, on a 5-point scale).

Familiarity with influencer scandals was relatively high across the sample: 37.9% of respondents reported being very familiar with such situations, 23.6% moderately familiar, 17.4% slightly familiar, and 16.4% extremely familiar, while only 4.6% reported not being familiar at all. Consistent with this, a majority of respondents (57.4%) reported having personally witnessed a brand being criticised because of its association with an influencer involved in a scandal.

4.2.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for composite scores by scenario ($N = 195$)

Composite	**Scenario**	**Mean**	**SD**	**Min-Max**
Brand Trust	A (High fit)	3.17	1.02	1–5
	B (Low fit)	3.48	1.13	1–5
	C (Rapid response)	2.48	1.02	1–5
	D (Delayed response)	3.65	0.96	1–5
Purchase Caution	A (High fit)	3.44	1.00	1–5
	B (Low fit)	3.19	1.09	1–5
	C (Rapid response)	2.62	1.09	1–5
	D (Delayed response)	3.83	0.91	1–5
Brand Equity	A (High fit)	3.12	1.00	1–5
	B (Low fit)	3.55	0.96	1–5
	C (Rapid response)	2.73	1.04	1–5
	D (Delayed response)	3.55	0.86	1.33–5

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the three composite dependent variables (brand trust, purchase caution, and brand equity) across the four experimental scenarios. All composite scores were computed on the original 1–5 Likert scale, with higher scores consistently reflecting a stronger negative reaction to the scandal.

Across all three dependent variables, mean scores were noticeably higher in Scenario D (delayed or absent brand response) than in Scenario C (rapid and authentic response), suggesting a considerable difference in perceived damage depending on the brand's response strategy; this pattern is formally tested in section 4.2.7 (H3). Comparing Scenario A (high brand-influencer fit) and Scenario B (low fit), mean purchase caution was somewhat higher in Scenario A, while mean brand trust and brand equity were somewhat higher in Scenario B; this pattern is formally tested in section 4.2.6 (H2). Standard deviations were relatively similar across scenarios (ranging from 0.86 to 1.13), suggesting comparable response variability across conditions.

4.2.3 Reliability

Prior to hypothesis testing, the internal consistency of each measurement scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, calculated separately for each construct (Trust, Purchase Caution, and Brand Equity) within each of the four scenarios (A, B, C, and D). This scenario-specific approach was necessary given that each construct was measured with a distinct set of three items per scenario. One item within the Trust scale was reverse-coded in each scenario prior to analysis to ensure consistency of direction with the other items (Trust_A2_R, Trust_B3_R, Trust_C3_R, and Trust_D3_R). Following common methodological guidelines, an alpha value of .70 or above was considered indicative of acceptable internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978). The results for each scale are presented below.

Table 3: Reliability Statistics for the Trust Scale Across Scenarios

Scale	**N**	**Items**	**Cronbach's α**	**Item-Total Corr.**	**Max α if Deleted**
Trust_A	195	3	.779	.587–.679	.737
Trust_B	195	3	.783	.611–.629	.719
Trust_C	195	3	.788	.609–.645	.735
Trust_D	195	3	.778	.590–.644	.731

All four Trust scales (across Scenarios A, B, C, and D) demonstrated good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .778 to .788, comfortably exceeding the recommended .70 threshold. Corrected item-total correlations were all above .30, confirming that each item contributed meaningfully to its respective scale. No item removal would have improved reliability further, so all three items were retained in each scale.

Table 4: Reliability Statistics for the Purchase Caution Scale Across Scenarios

Scale	**N**	**Items**	**Cronbach's α**	**Item-Total Corr.**	**Max α if Deleted**
Caution_A	195	3	.794	.617–.675	.741
Caution_B	195	3	.742	.522–.609	.712
Caution_C	195	3	.775	.591–.630	.720
Caution_D	195	3	.757	.545–.636	.720

The Purchase Caution scale also showed satisfactory internal consistency across the four scenarios, though with somewhat more variability than the Trust scale, with alpha coefficients ranging from .742 in Scenario B to .794 in Scenario A. In every case, item-total correlations remained above the .30 benchmark, indicating that all items measured the construct coherently. Since removing any item would not have raised reliability further, the full three-item structure was kept for each scenario.

Table 5: Reliability Statistics for the Brand Equity Scale Across Scenarios

Scale	**N**	**Items**	**Cronbach's α**	**Item-Total Corr.**	**Max α if Deleted**
Equity_A	195	3	.791	.606–.653	.744
Equity_B	195	3	.780	.614–.625	.711
Equity_C	195	3	.807	.597–.686	.805
Equity_D	195	3	.740	.526–.630	.713

The Brand Equity scale demonstrated the strongest reliability of the three constructs, with alpha values ranging from .740 (Scenario D) to .807 (Scenario C), all comfortably above the .70 threshold. Item-total correlations exceeded .30 in every case, confirming each item's contribution to its scale. One exception is worth noting: for Equity_C, removing item Equity_C2 would raise alpha slightly (from .807 to .805, essentially no real gain), so retaining all three items remains the right call across all four scenarios.

4.2.4 Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed by computing Pearson correlations between the Trust, Purchase Caution, and Brand Equity composite scores within each of the four scenarios. Discriminant validity is supported when constructs that are conceptually distinct also show low empirical correlation with one another, typically below a threshold of .85 (Kline, 2011). Across all four scenarios, correlations between the three constructs were consistently weak and statistically non-significant (all $|r| < .12$, all $p > .09$), indicating no meaningful overlap between them.

Table 6: Correlations Between Trust, Purchase Caution, and Brand Equity by Scenario

Scenario	**Trust-Caution**	**Trust-Equity**	**Caution-Equity**
A	-.026 ($p = .722$)	.026 ($p = .719$)	.120 ($p = .096$)
B	-.038 ($p = .599$)	-.071 ($p = .321$)	.018 ($p = .799$)
C	.099 ($p = .167$)	-.009 ($p = .905$)	-.024 ($p = .742$)
D	-.114 ($p = .111$)	.049 ($p = .493$)	.001 ($p = .985$)

4.2.5 Testing H1

Before computing composite scores, item wording was reviewed to check the direction of each item. One item in the *Trust_A* scale (*Trust_A2*: "I feel confident that Lumio acts responsibly as a brand, despite this scandal") was reverse-worded relative to the other two items, since higher agreement reflected a more positive rather than a more negative reaction.

This item was therefore reverse-coded before the composite *Trust_A* score was calculated, so that higher scores consistently represented a stronger negative reaction across all three items. The *Caution_A* and *Equity_A* items were all worded in the same direction and did not require any reverse-coding.

Results showed a mixed pattern across the three dependent variables. Brand trust scores ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.02$) were significantly above the neutral midpoint, $t(194) = 2.32$, $p = .021$, $d = 0.17$, indicating that respondents reported a modest but reliable increase in negative reactions related to brand trust. Purchase caution scores ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.00$) were also significantly above the midpoint, $t(194) = 6.10$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.44$, the largest deviation from the midpoint among the three dependent variables, indicating that respondents reported meaningfully increased caution about purchasing from Lumio following the scandal. Brand equity scores ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.00$) did not differ significantly from the neutral midpoint, $t(194) = 1.70$, $p = .091$, $d = 0.12$, and the 95% confidence interval for the effect size included zero. As reported in Section 4.2.8, brand trust did not remain significant under a Bonferroni-corrected threshold accounting for the three comparisons conducted within this hypothesis ($\alpha = .017$).

Taken together, these results provide partial support for H1. Respondents reported significantly elevated brand trust concerns and, more markedly, increased purchase caution following exposure to the influencer scandal, consistent with a guilt-by-association effect. Brand equity scores, however, did not differ significantly from the neutral midpoint.

4.2.6 Testing H2

As with Scenario A, one item in the *Trust_B* scale (*Trust_B3*) was reverse-worded relative to the other two items and was reverse-coded before computing the *Trust_B* composite, so that higher scores consistently represented a stronger negative reaction. The *Caution_B* and *Equity_B* items required no recoding.

Prior to conducting the paired-samples t-tests reported in this section and in Section 4.2.7, the normality of the difference scores was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test. Results indicated a significant deviation from normality for four of the six difference scores (Diff_Trust_AB, $p = .008$; Diff_Trust_CD, $p = .010$; Diff_Caution_CD, $p = .006$; Diff_Equity_CD, $p = .048$), while the remaining two did not significantly deviate from normality (Diff_Caution_AB, $p = .128$; Diff_Equity_AB, $p = .061$). Given the sample size ($n = 195$), the paired-samples t-test is considered robust to violations of normality under the Central Limit Theorem, and

results were therefore interpreted without further transformation of the data.

H2 proposed that brand-influencer fit moderates consumer reactions to the scandal, such that reactions would be more negative when the influencer's image closely matches the brand's image (Scenario A, high fit) than when it does not (Scenario B, low fit). Robustness of these results to multiple-comparison correction is addressed in Section 4.2.8.

Results did not support this directional prediction and instead revealed a mixed, partly reversed pattern. Purchase caution scores were higher in the high-fit condition ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.00$) than in the low-fit condition ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.09$), $t(194) = 2.27$, $p = .024$, $d = 0.16$. Brand trust scores, by contrast, were significantly lower in the high-fit condition ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.02$) than in the low-fit condition ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.13$), $t(194) = -2.97$, $p = .003$, $d = -0.21$. Brand equity followed the same reversed pattern, with significantly lower scores in the high-fit condition ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.00$) than in the low-fit condition ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.96$), $t(194) = -4.17$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.30$.

H2 is therefore not supported in its hypothesized direction. Brand trust and brand equity scores were significantly *lower* in the high-fit condition than in the low-fit condition, contrary to expectations, while purchase caution followed the predicted direction but did not survive correction for multiple comparisons (see Section 4.2.8). A closer perceived alignment between influencer and brand did not deepen negative reactions as predicted; for trust and equity, the opposite pattern was observed, with the low-fit condition associated with more favourable scores.

4.2.7 Testing H3

As with the previous scenarios, the *Trust_ C* scale contained one reverse-worded item (*Trust_ C3*), which was reverse-coded prior to computing the composite score.

H3 proposed that the brand's response strategy moderates consumer reactions to the scandal, such that a rapid and authentic response (Scenario C) would be associated with more favourable consumer reactions than a delayed or absent response (Scenario D). As with H2, a Bonferroni-corrected significance threshold of $\alpha = .017$ (.05/3) was applied to account for the three comparisons conducted for this hypothesis.

Results strongly supported this hypothesis across all three dependent variables, with all differences remaining significant well beyond the corrected threshold. Brand trust scores were significantly lower in the rapid-response condition ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.02$) than in

the delayed/absent-response condition ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.96$), $t(194) = -12.66$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.91$, representing a large effect. Purchase caution showed the same pattern, with significantly lower scores in Scenario C ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.09$) than in Scenario D ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.91$), $t(194) = -11.70$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.84$. Brand equity was also significantly lower in Scenario C ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.04$) than in Scenario D ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.86$), $t(194) = -8.55$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.61$.

H3 is therefore fully supported: consumer reactions were significantly more negative following a delayed or absent brand response compared to a rapid and authentic one, across brand trust, purchase caution, and brand equity, with medium-to-large effect sizes across all three dimensions. The magnitude of these effects is discussed further in light of design-related caveats in Section 6.1.

4.2.8 Additional Statistical Analyses

As reported in Sections 4.1.3 to 4.1.5, a Bonferroni correction was applied within each hypothesis ($\alpha = .05/3 \approx .017$). As a more conservative robustness check, this section re-examines the same nine p-values across H1, H2 and H3 under family-wise correction applied to the full set of tests rather than within each hypothesis separately. Three procedures were used: Bonferroni, the most conservative, adjusting the threshold to $\alpha = .05/9 \approx .0056$; Holm-Bonferroni, a slightly less conservative sequential variant; and Benjamini-Hochberg, which controls the false discovery rate rather than the family-wise error rate and is generally considered more appropriate for exploratory social science research with a moderate number of related tests (Benjamini and Hochberg, 1995).

Table 7 presents the original p-value for each test alongside its significance status under each correction method.

Under the most conservative Bonferroni correction, six of the nine effects remain statistically significant, including all three dependent variables under H3, brand trust and brand equity under H2, and purchase caution under H1. Two effects, brand trust under H1 ($p = .021$) and purchase caution under H2 ($p = .024$), no longer reach significance under this stricter threshold, consistent with the per-hypothesis correction reported earlier for H2. The Holm-Bonferroni procedure produces an identical pattern of results, as the gap between the sixth-ranked and seventh-ranked p-values is large enough that the sequential adjustment does not alter the outcome.

Table 7: Robustness of t-test results to multiple-comparison correction

Hypothesis	Dependent variable	Original p	Bon.	Ho.-Bon.	Ben.-Hoch.
H1	Brand trust	.021	ns	ns	**sig.**
H1	Purchase caution	<.001	sig.	sig.	sig.
H1	Brand equity	.091	ns	ns	ns
H2	Purchase caution	.024	ns	ns	**sig.**
H2	Brand trust	.003	sig.	sig.	sig.
H2	Brand equity	<.001	sig.	sig.	sig.
H3	Brand trust	<.001	sig.	sig.	sig.
H3	Purchase caution	<.001	sig.	sig.	sig.
H3	Brand equity	<.001	sig.	sig.	sig.

Note: sig. = remains statistically significant under the corrected threshold; ns = no longer statistically significant. Brand equity under H1 was already non-significant at the uncorrected $\alpha = .05$ level and is included here for completeness.

Under the Benjamini-Hochberg procedure, however, eight of the nine effects remain statistically significant; only brand equity under H1, which was already non-significant at the uncorrected threshold, fails to reach significance.

5 Discussion and Contributions

5.1 From Data to Meaning

Overall, the results are more mixed than expected. Some hypotheses are clearly confirmed, both by the survey data and by what the interviewees said, while others reveal real tension between what the literature predicts, what industry professionals believe, and what the survey shows about consumer reactions. This section discusses each hypothesis in turn, before examining where the survey and interview findings converge or diverge, and closing with theoretical and managerial implications.

H1 is only partially supported (see Section 4.2.5): purchase caution and, more weakly, brand trust were elevated, but brand equity was unaffected. This pattern suggests that purchase caution is a more immediate, reflexive reaction, while brand equity, as conceptualised by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993), is a broader, more cumulative construct that a single hypothetical scandal involving a fictional, unfamiliar brand may simply not be enough to shake.

The interviews add nuance to this partial support, as both professionals described the guilt-

by-association mechanism from their own field experience. Santy recalled a case where an external guest's inappropriate comment at a brand event still created an "indirect implication" for the brand, even though it was never named. Vanbutsele was more direct, stating that consumers hold brands partly responsible "because it does originate from the brand." Both accounts resonate with the mechanism underlying H1, though neither interviewee framed this responsibility as damaging to long-term brand value, consistent with the survey's null result on brand equity.

H2 is also only partially supported, and in a genuinely surprising way (Section 4.2.6): purchase caution followed the expected direction, but brand trust and brand equity moved in the opposite direction, both significantly lower, i.e. less negative, in the high-fit condition. A few interpretations seem plausible. Consumers may unconsciously extend more benefit of the doubt when the fit is strong, as if the coherence of the pairing signals that the brand "knows" the influencer well. A weak fit, conversely, might make the collaboration itself look like a poor decision in hindsight. It is also possible that purchase caution is a more behavioural, reflexive reaction, while trust and equity are broader evaluative judgments shaped differently by a less coherent pairing. Either way, fit does not appear to operate as a single, uniform moderator across all brand outcomes.

This is where the survey results diverge most clearly from the interviews. Both Santy and Vanbutsele were unambiguous that a stronger fit increases reputational risk, not the opposite. Santy described clients like Disney or Pokémon screening influencers precisely because closer association means more exposure if something goes wrong, expecting talent to be "Disney-proof." Vanbutsele made a related point when explaining her refusal of a dating-app sponsorship while in a relationship, framing fit as protecting credibility because audiences notice when it is missing. Both also pointed to the Morphe-James Charles case, where a strong, ambassador-level fit intensified the backlash. This professional intuition is consistent with the literature (Schouten et al., 2020; Che et al., 2025), which makes the reversed survey pattern worth taking seriously rather than dismissing as noise. It may be that professionals are reasoning from long-term, high-visibility partnerships and severe scandals, while the survey captured a single, moderate exposure to a fictional brand, leaving more room for the "benefit of the doubt" mechanism described above to operate.

The interviews align closely with H3, the hypothesis on which the interview and survey findings converge most consistently, and for which all three dependent variables remained

significant under the strictest Bonferroni correction (Section 4.2.7), making it both the most statistically robust and the most practically consistent finding of this thesis. Both interviewees independently identified speed and clarity of communication as central to limiting reputational damage. Responding to the Morphe-James Charles simulation, Santy said he would have distanced the brand from the influencer more quickly, even without full certainty about the allegations, describing a protective step back "without necessarily breaking it off." Vanbutsele made a similar point, arguing Morphe should have responded faster because "otherwise people keep speculating," which is precisely what allows a situation to escalate.

Neither interviewee suggested immediate termination was the correct first move; both instead prioritised acknowledgment and transparency, with full termination coming later once severity became clearer. What both agreed on without hesitation was that Morphe's prolonged silence was a mistake that deepened the damage once it did react. This convergence between theory, statistics and professional judgment makes H3 the most consistent and practically actionable finding of this thesis. However, given the design-related caveats discussed in Section 6.1, particularly the risk of demand characteristics from the consecutive presentation of Scenarios C and D, the size of this effect should be read as an upper-bound estimate rather than a precise measure of the phenomenon in real-world settings.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

Beyond their practical implications, discussed in the following section, the findings of this thesis contribute to the literature on guilt by association, brand-influencer fit and brand crisis management in three main ways.

First, this thesis nuances existing guilt-by-association research by showing that brand outcomes do not all respond uniformly to a single scandal. Prior work on scandal spillover (Kintu and Ben-Slimane, 2020; Kunz et al., 2025) and negative brand engagement (Dolan et al., 2025) has generally treated the negative consequences of influencer scandals for brands as a broadly shared outcome, without distinguishing systematically between the different dimensions through which a brand can be affected. The results of this thesis suggest that this distinction matters: purchase caution and, to a lesser and less robust extent, brand trust shifted significantly following exposure to the scandal, while brand equity did not. This pattern is consistent with Aaker's (1991) and Keller's (1993) characterisation of brand equity as a broader, more cumulative construct built through repeated experiences and associations, and suggests that a single, low-involvement scandal involving an unfamiliar brand may be

sufficient to trigger immediate, reflexive reactions without necessarily denting a more stable evaluative structure. This offers a more differentiated view of guilt by association than is typically found in the literature, one in which spillover effects may be real but uneven across brand-related constructs.

Second, and most notably, the reversed pattern observed for H2 complicates the assumption, shared by both prior research (Schouten et al., 2020; Che et al., 2025) and the practitioners interviewed for this thesis, that a stronger brand-influencer fit systematically amplifies reputational risk. While purchase caution did increase more in the high-fit condition, consistent with this assumption, brand trust and brand equity moved in the opposite direction, with lower scores observed in the high-fit condition than in the low-fit one. This suggests that brand-influencer fit may not operate as a single, uniform risk amplifier across all evaluative dimensions of a brand, as implied by the meaning-transfer logic underlying Kunz et al.'s (2025) work, but may instead exert divergent effects depending on whether the outcome in question is more behavioural (such as purchase caution) or more evaluative and trust-based (such as brand trust and brand equity). One plausible explanation, discussed further in Section 5.1, is that a coherent brand-influencer pairing may afford the brand more benefit of the doubt on trust-related dimensions, even as it heightens behavioural caution. This finding does not contradict the fit literature so much as suggest that its risk-amplification logic, largely developed and evidenced in relation to reach and behavioural outcomes, may need to be qualified when extended to more stable, evaluative brand constructs such as trust and equity.

Third, the results for H3 offer empirical, survey-based support for Coombs' (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory and for Dolan et al.'s (2025) emphasis on immediacy and perceived authenticity in influencer-related crises, and do so with a level of statistical robustness, surviving the strictest correction applied across all tested hypotheses, that reinforces confidence in this mechanism. Where much of the existing literature on brand response to influencer scandals draws on case-based or interview-based evidence (Kintu and Ben-Slimane, 2020; Wilson et al., 2026), this thesis provides converging experimental and practitioner-based evidence for the same underlying logic, addressing part of the fragmentation identified in the research gap between the psychological mechanisms of scandal spillover and the managerial decisions brands make under uncertainty.

Taken together, these contributions suggest that guilt by association, brand-influencer fit and brand response strategy do not operate as simple, additive risk factors, but interact with the

specific brand outcome under consideration in ways that existing frameworks do not yet fully capture.

5.3 Managerial Contributions

Beyond their theoretical contribution, the findings of this thesis translate into a few concrete recommendations for brands working with influencers, both before a partnership begins and after a scandal occurs.

The first recommendation concerns timing. Across the three hypotheses tested, response speed was associated with the most consistent differences in brand trust, purchase caution and brand equity, more so than brand-influencer fit. In practice, this suggests brands should not wait for full certainty before communicating, even if the final decision on the partnership is not yet made. Both interviewees made a similar point: a brand does not need to immediately end a collaboration to protect itself, but it does need to show, quickly, that it is aware of the situation.

The second recommendation follows directly from the first: brands should prepare a basic crisis communication plan before launching a campaign, rather than improvising one once a scandal breaks. Such a plan does not need to anticipate every scenario, but should at minimum define who communicates, what tone to adopt, and what a first statement should contain. Having this ready in advance removes the pressure of reacting under time constraints, which the interviews suggest is often when the most damaging mistakes happen.

The third recommendation concerns how brands think about brand-influencer fit. Both interviewees, echoing a common industry assumption, expected that a stronger alignment between an influencer's and a brand's image would increase reputational risk if something went wrong. The results of this study complicate that assumption: a strong fit was associated with higher purchase caution, as expected, but not with lower brand trust or equity, and in some cases the opposite pattern was observed. This suggests fit should not be treated as a simple risk dial. Instead, it should continue to be evaluated mainly for what it is meant to do, strengthening the credibility and effectiveness of a campaign, while response readiness should be treated as a separate safeguard, regardless of how closely a brand is perceived to be linked to a given influencer.

The fourth recommendation is that upstream risk mitigation remains worthwhile, even though it cannot fully eliminate risk. Reviewing an influencer's past content, drafting clear con-

tractual clauses on expected conduct, and relying on sector-level tools such as the Belgian influencer certificate are practices already used by professionals in the field, and they likely reduce the chances of working with a clearly inappropriate partner. However, even a well-vetted partnership does not fully protect a brand from scandal spillover, since guilt by association appeared regardless of fit.

Taken together, these four points suggest a simple hierarchy of priorities for brands entering influencer partnerships. Careful influencer selection is useful and should not be neglected, but it is not sufficient on its own. Brand-influencer fit should be optimised for campaign effectiveness rather than treated as a primary risk-management lever. Crisis response readiness, the ability to communicate quickly, clearly and honestly once a scandal emerges, is the factor most within a brand's control, and the one this research found to be most consistently associated with how consumers ultimately judge the brand.

6 Limitations and Future Research

Although this thesis provides both survey-based and interview-based insight into how influencer scandals affect associated brands, several limitations must be acknowledged, as they constrain the generalisability and interpretation of the findings.

6.1 Methodological limitations

This study has several methodological limitations that should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings. First, there was no **scandal-free control condition**. All respondents were exposed to Scenario A, so H1 could only be tested against the neutral midpoint of the scale instead of a truly unaffected baseline. This is a fairly common issue in single-group vignette designs, but it does limit how strong the causal claims can be. Second, the four scenarios were always presented in the same **fixed order** (A, B, C, D), instead of being randomised or counterbalanced. Since Scenario A always came before B, and C always came before D, part of the differences found for H2 and H3 could reflect carry-over effects such as anchoring, contrast or fatigue, rather than a clean effect of the manipulated condition itself. This matters particularly for H2, where the reversed pattern found for brand trust and equity might partly come from respondents judging Scenario B in relation to what they had just seen in Scenario A, and not only from the mechanism discussed earlier. A counterbalanced design in future studies would help separate real condition effects from order effects.

The effect sizes found for H3 are also quite large ($d = 0.91, 0.84, 0.61$), which calls for some

caution regarding possible **demand characteristics**. Because Scenarios C and D described the exact same scandal and were shown one right after the other, the contrast between a fast and a delayed response was probably very obvious to respondents, who may have partly answered in the expected direction rather than reacting spontaneously. This doesn't really put into question the direction of the effect, which lines up with both the literature Coombs (2007) and what the interviewees said, but it might have inflated how strong it looks. Using a between-subjects design, or separating the scenarios with filler items, would help avoid this in future research. Along the same lines, the survey didn't include any **manipulation checks**, meaning respondents were never asked to rate their own perception of the manipulated variables (e.g. how similar Alex and Lumio actually seemed for H2, or how fast the response felt for H3). So even though the scenarios were built to make these differences clear, there's no way to formally confirm that respondents actually picked up on them the way they were meant to.

A few other limitations concern the design and the measures more broadly. Brand-influencer fit (H2) and response strategy (H3) were both manipulated as binary conditions, high vs. low fit, rapid vs. delayed response, even though in reality both exist on more of a continuum. This means more nuanced situations, like a moderate fit or a response that's fast but doesn't feel sincere, weren't captured here. All three constructs were also measured through self-reported reactions to a fictitious, low-stakes brand and influencer. This choice was made on purpose, to avoid bias coming from pre-existing brand attitudes, but it also means respondents had nothing real at stake, financially or emotionally, and reactions to a real scandal involving a brand people actually care about could look quite different, which ties into the attitude-behaviour gap already discussed in the literature. Finally, since all three dependent variables were collected using the same self-report instrument at the same point in time, common method bias may have somewhat inflated the relationships found between them.

6.2 Sample limitations

The quantitative sample consisted of 195 respondents recruited through social media and personal networks, a convenience sample that likely over-represents younger, social-media-active individuals who are already familiar with influencer culture. This may have inflated sensitivity to influencer scandals and limits how representative the results are across age groups, countries, and levels of social media engagement. The expert interview component relied on only two interviews, both with professionals in the Belgian, Dutch-speaking influencer marketing industry. While valuable, this small and geographically concentrated sample can't be

assumed to reflect practices or regulatory environments elsewhere, including French-speaking Belgium or other countries with different cancel-culture dynamics. Additionally, the two interviewees were chosen to represent the influencer and agency sides of influencer marketing, rather than the brand-management side specifically. Since this thesis focuses on brands whose associated influencer becomes involved in a scandal, a brand manager or in-house marketing professional working directly with influencers would have added a complementary perspective, particularly regarding how brands decide internally on crisis response strategies and vet influencer partnerships. This profile was not included due to time and access constraints, and represents an avenue for future research (see Section 6.4).

6.3 Scope limitations

This thesis focused on a global product category and did not examine whether scandal severity or type (e.g., interpersonal conflict vs. ethical/legal misconduct), brand type (luxury vs. mass-market, B2B vs. B2C), influencer type (macro vs. nano/micro), or platform (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) moderates the guilt-by-association effect, despite literature suggesting these factors shape spillover intensity differently.

The cross-sectional design also means the research captures only an immediate reaction, not how brand trust, image, and equity evolve over time following the incident.

6.4 Future research

Finally, future studies replicating this design should incorporate dedicated manipulation check items, asking respondents to directly rate their perception of the manipulated variables (e.g., perceived brand-influencer fit, perceived speed and clarity of the brand's response). This would allow researchers to formally confirm that experimental conditions were interpreted as intended, strengthening confidence in the internal validity of moderation effects such as those tested for H2 and H3.

In addition, future research would benefit from including brand-side professionals, such as in-house marketing managers or brand directors who work directly with influencers, alongside the influencer and agency perspectives gathered here. This would help clarify how brands internally assess influencer partnerships and decide on crisis response strategies, complementing the practitioner perspective offered in this thesis.

7 Conclusion

This thesis set out to understand how influencer scandals affect the brands associated with them, and, more importantly, to understand what brands can actually do about it. This second part of the objective mattered as much as the first: the goal was never simply to document that guilt by association exists, but to produce something a brand manager could genuinely use when facing this kind of situation.

Overall, the results were more nuanced than expected. Exposure to a scandal does have an effect on consumers, but not on everything at once: trust and purchase caution went up fairly quickly, while brand equity, which is a more stable construct, did not really move after just one controversy (H1). Brand-influencer fit was more surprising: it was expected to make things worse when the fit was strong, but the results showed the opposite for trust and equity, even though both interviewees were convinced fit would increase the risk (H2). The clearest result by far was the brand's response strategy: a fast and honest reaction reduced the damage on every variable measured, while a slow or vague one made it worse. This is also the one result where the literature, the survey and the interviews all agreed (H3).

Comparing the interviews with the survey results was probably the most useful part of this thesis. It showed where professionals' intuition matches what consumers actually do, which was the case for H3, and where it doesn't, which was the case for H2. This suggests that some assumptions in influencer marketing, especially around brand-influencer fit, might need to be reconsidered.

This research obviously has limitations: only one hypothetical scenario with a fictional brand and influencer, a sample that skews young and Belgian, and only two expert interviews. The results should be seen as a starting point rather than a final answer, and future research looking at real scandals over time, with a wider range of professional perspectives, would help build on this.

Still, taken as a whole, this thesis offers a clear and, I believe, genuinely useful message for brands: they cannot fully control who they work with, nor guarantee that an influencer will never make a mistake, but they retain full control over how quickly and how honestly they respond when it happens. If there is one takeaway a brand manager should walk away with, it is this one. Because influencers will keep buzzing, scandals will keep happening, and the only real question left for brands is: bad buzz, or good crisis management?

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