The Cancel Culture Conundrum:

Exploring the Risks for Influencer Marketing

by

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Abstract

Title: The Cancel Culture Conundrum: Exploring the Risk for Influencer Marketing

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Thesis Purpose: The emergence of cancel culture has become a widely recognised phenomenon, yet its implications for influencer marketing has not been acknowledged in academic research. The purpose of this study was thus to explore how cancel culture is affecting organisation's perception of risk with influencer marketing and which strategies are adopted to mitigate the risk.

Theory: Previous research and central theories within influencer marketing, cancel culture and decision making were presented and then integrated in a conceptual framework to contextualise them and explore the sequence between the related concepts.

Methodology: To achieve the research purpose, a qualitative study with semi-structured interviews were conducted with influencer marketing professionals.

Conclusions: The main findings suggested that perceived risk of cancel culture for influencer marketing varied to an extent, but that respondents could identify that aspects of the decision-making process had been affected by the emergence of cancel culture and that the strategies adopted by organisations to mitigate the risk of cancel culture were both proactive and reactive.

Practical Implications: The empirical findings suggest that cancel culture has managerial implications for influencer marketing, which require revision of the current decision-making processes. Furthermore, the integration of influencer marketing and cancel culture proved to contain rich units of data, providing a fruitful foundation for future research.

Keywords: Cancel culture, influencer marketing, decision making, risk, market communication, association network theory, strategy
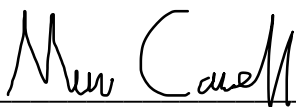
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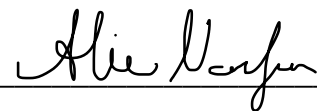
First and foremost, we would like to extend our sincere appreciation to the industry professionals who graciously devoted their precious time to participate in this study. Our heartfelt thanks go out to all of the respondents for sharing their invaluable insights on influencer marketing and thoughts on cancel culture. By generously imparting your knowledge and experiences, you have played an instrumental role in making this report possible.

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1 Introduction

On the third of November 2022, Swedish social media influencer Margaux Dietz posted a video blog to her YouTube channel. The video depicts the influencer attempting to open her front door to find it blocked by an unconscious man she laughingly describes as "bloody and bruised", and then encourages her five-year-old son to poke the man, which he also does. Not long after the video is first posted, criticism starts to emerge (Larsson, 2022). The critique is aimed at the influencer's light-hearted attitude towards a potentially harmful situation, perceived disregard for the integrity of the filmed man as well as poor parental judgement (Good, 2022). Media quickly picks up the story, and the incident is soon all over the headlines. Although Dietz was swift to take the video down and issue a public apology, the hate storm was already beyond control (Larsson, 2022).

Dietz is among the bigger influencers in Sweden, with a following of 280.000 on YouTube (2023a) and 324.000 on Instagram (2023b). She has hosted her own series, and participated in many televised programs, making her a household name in Sweden. And up until the third of November 2022, she had plenty of long-lasting collaborations with companies. Following the incident, many of these publicly distanced themselves from Dietz. The athleisure wear brand Stronger, publicly states that the influencers behaviour is not in accordance with their beliefs (Palmström, 2022). The prosecco brand Mionetto closely follows, briefly stating that they distance themselves from Dietz in response to recent events (Westerberg & Palmström, 2022). Several other brands, such as Elixir Pharma and Revolutionrace are also quick to withdraw their collaboration with the influencer (Westerberg & Palmström, 2022).

Many are now calling Margaux Dietz a target of *cancel culture* (Good, 2022; Larsson, 2022). The novel, yet widely recognised, phenomenon has become part of today's digital landscape (Ng, 2020; Lokhande & Natu, 2022; Tandoc, Tan Hui Ru, Lee Huei, Min Qi Charlyn, Chua & Goh, 2022). The term carries many connotations varying from calls for accountability, to censorship and punishment. Although exact definitions vary, it is widely agreed upon that the concept of cancel culture is, in its essence, a collective attempt to exclude individuals who have exhibited attitudes or behaviour that violates the general perception of norms and morals from markets or the public sphere (Clark, 2020; Ng, 2020; Lokhande & Natu, 2022). Cancel culture is enacted through the action of *cancelling*, which Norris (2023) defines as: "the practice of withdrawing support for (or cancelling) public figures and companies after they have done or said something considered objectionable or offensive" (p. 150).

It goes without saying that cancel culture has significant consequences for the person that is *cancelled*, that is, the person which is the target of cancel culture. Influencers, such as Dietz herself, are especially susceptible to experiencing the backhand force of cancel culture due to high visibility

and presence on social media, the arena for cancel culture (Lewis & Christin, 2020). There have been several instances of cancel culture involving influencers gaining significant amounts of media attention as well as mobilising massive numbers of internet users. However, influencers are not the only ones affected by their own cancellation. Cancelling, as performed through public discourse, affects stakeholders such as followers (Tandoc et al., 2022) and collaborative partners (Kintu & Slimane, 2020). The rapid growth of *influencer marketing* (Mangold & Faulds, 2009) has led influencers to become associated with various brands, which consequently causes an incident of cancelling to result in ripple effects (Kintu & Slimane, 2020). As illustrated with the case of Dietz, collaborative partners such as Stronger and Mionetto responded swiftly to the incident and were explicit in distancing themselves from the influencer (Westerberg & Palmström, 2022). Both the urgency and content of the response followed the pressure exerted by the public, and it was prevalent that the companies were concerned about potential spill-over effects on their brand (Palmström, 2022).

1.1 Problematization

Although cancel culture is gaining more attention in media, it is still a novel topic in academic research with much of the literature taking concern in either the macro perspective of societal effects (Clark, 2020; Lokhande & Natu, 2022; Norris, 2023), or the micro perspective of the effects on individuals and organisations engaging in or being targeted by the phenomenon (Tandoc et al., 2022; Abbasi, Fayyaz, Ting, Munir, Bashir & Zhang, 2022; Lewis & Christin, 2020). The phenomenon is still to be explored in contexts of organisational implications, even though it could require managerial action.

The emergence of cancel culture being facilitated by social media (Ng, 2020; Tandoc et al., 2022; Lokhande & Natu, 2022) makes it accessible for all individuals and organisations to participate, but also makes it possible for anyone to become the target of boycotts and blacklisting (Clark, 2020; Ahuja & Kerketta, 2021). In the growing body of research exploring cancel culture, there is a consensus that individuals or organisations become the target of cancel culture due to the public perceiving them as having committed a transgression or being guilty of moral misconduct. Whilst scholars have explored the effects of being directly targeted by cancel culture for individuals (Lewis & Christin, 2020) and organisations (Abbasi et al., 2022, Ahuja & Kerketta, 2021) respectively, there is a research gap addressing how organisations can be affected by their association to a cancelled entity.

Previous research, often with origins in association network theory, has identified a risk for organisations to be associated with celebrities and influencers that have been the subject of negative information (Till & Shimp, 1998; Um & Kim, 2016) or have been caught up in a scandal (Knittel & Stango, 2014; Kintu & Ben-Slimane, 2020). Both negative celebrity information and

scandals bear resemblance to a cancellation, as they frame public figures within the context of a transgression or moral misconduct. Yet, associative network theory (as seen in: Till & Shimp, 1998; Louie & Obermiller, 2002; Um & Kim, 2016) has not been applied to the contemporary context of cancel culture. Additionally, previous studies explore the perceptions and effects of this matter from the consumer perspective using quantitative methods, neglecting the perception and experiences of organisations. This presents a gap within research, which is arguably gaining relevance with the emergence of influencer marketing as a market communication strategy for organisations.

Although influencer marketing is a fast-growing industry that has gained more attention in academic literature over the last decade (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth 2017), the rapid growth of its popularity and dynamic nature of the industry calls for further exploration. Many organisations are recognising the value of engaging in influencer marketing (Ye, Hudders, De Jans & De Veirman, 2021) and deem it an efficient strategy to reach new audiences, increase engagement and purchase intent among consumers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). A study consisting of respondents form 3500 marketing agencies, brands, and other relevant professionals regarding the current state of influencer marketing suggests that the influencer marketing industry is set to grow to approximately $21.1 Billion in 2023 and 23% of respondents intend to spend more than 40% of their entire marketing budget on influencer campaigns (Geyser, 2023), indicating that influencer marketing will become even more important. Current research from the managerial perspective on influencer marketing often considers it a strategic communication practice, and is oriented towards exploring, conceptualising, and motivating the use of influencer marketing as a communication strategy. Theories predominantly provide frameworks for how to manage an organisation in choosing suitable influencers to endorse their products or services, or the benefits of adapting influencer marketing as communication strategy (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014; Lin, Bruning & Swarna 2018; Gräve, 2019; Navarro, Moreno, Molleda, Khalil & Verhoeven, 2020).

Research is yet to conceptualise influencer marketing within associative network theory, and to address the implications of cancel culture for organisations employing influencer marketing. Although some scholars have briefly touched upon risks of being associated with influencers (Kintu & Ben-Slimane, 2020; Cornwell, Humphreys & Kwon, 2022), the risk of cancel culture requires further exploration. With the phenomenon gaining wide recognition and becoming an integrated part of the discourse surrounding influencers, scholars must understand how the perceived risk of cancel culture is affecting organisations working with influencer marketing and how this in extension affects the way organisations approach influencer marketing strategically. Due to the lack of exploration of the phenomenon, the current practices to mitigate the risk of cancel culture are not established in theory. Exploring these issues can result in a better understanding of the evolving and complex landscape of social media and influencer marketing and provide implications for how managers should navigate this emerging new terrain.

1.2 Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to explore the implications of the emerging cancel culture for influencer marketing by identifying its effect on professionals' perception of risk. Additionally, the study aims to create an understanding of how cancel culture is affecting decision making processes for influencer marketing by identifying which strategies are adopted by organisations to mitigate the risk of cancel culture.

> *RQ1*: How does the emergence of cancel culture affect professionals' perception of risks concerning influencer marketing?

> *RQ2:* Which strategies are adopted by organisations to mitigate the risk of cancel culture for influencer marketing?

1.3 Aim Contributions

This study aims at providing theoretical implications for the continued research within the field of influencer marketing and cancel culture alike by providing an integrated perspective which is yet missing in existing research. The integration is substantiated by empirical evidence, testifying to the perception of the phenomenon among professionals and the adopted strategies of organisations. The novel theoretical approach as well its empirical support provides a foundation for future research.

Additionally, the study aims to provide managerial implications for influencer marketing professionals. By integrating the research field of influencer marketing with the phenomenon of cancel culture, managers are provided with insights of how to navigate the dynamics of decision making within influencer marketing.

1.4 Delimitations

This study explores the phenomenon of cancel culture from the perspective of professionals working with influencer marketing in market communication. It does not explore the perspective of influencers or other people or organisations experiencing targeting of cancel culture, nor does it explore the consumers' perception of cancel culture. Although these perspectives constitute interesting implications of the phenomenon, it is beyond the scope established by the research questions. Furthermore, exactly what constitutes an influencer will be delimited for the purpose of this study. Influencers are defined as:

everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetize their following by integrating 'advertorials' into their blog or social media posts.

(Abidin, 2015)

This study is delimited within a Western perspective with the theory being based on primarily Western literature and the data collection being conducted in Sweden. This is partly due to Sweden being especially progressive within influencer marketing, but also due to the nature of the phenomenon cancel culture. In less democratic developing countries, cancel culture is positioned within a substantially different context and the considerable cultural differences between countries would make it difficult to make inferences on a global level. For this study, cancel culture will be defined as:

the phenomenon or practice of publicly rejecting, boycotting, or ending support for particular people or groups because of their socially or morally unacceptable views or actions

(Dictionary.com, 2023)

1.5 Outline of Thesis

The paper begins with providing a theory section, outlining the state of previous research and presenting the relevant theories for the research. The theory section is then integrated and contextualised in the conceptual framework which follows in the next section. The conceptual framework aims to aid the reader through the research by explaining the sequence of events in cancel culture, as well as to illustrate how different theoretical concepts are interrelated. The methodology section discloses how the research was conducted, and accounts for the deliberations and discussions involved in establishing the research method. Following this is the empirical analysis, which presents the results of the data collection whilst positioning the findings within theory. In the discussion, the findings and their significance are discussed in their context. Lastly, a concluding section summarises the findings in relation to the research questions and its implications for management and theory, whilst adhering to the limitations of the study and suggesting possible improvements and new directions for future research.

2 Theory

This section will first present the concept of market communication to provide the wider context for influencer marketing. To furthermore provide a sufficient background to influencer marketing, the theory section also includes a brief overview of the predecessor celebrity endorsements. Following this, influencer marketing is positioned for the purpose of the study through central concepts and theories. The phenomenon of cancel culture is then outlined in its holistic and relevant context, providing an integrated literature review of how cancel culture is affecting influencer marketing for both influencers and organisations. Lastly, decision making theories are introduced to understand how organisations are practically performing influencer marketing today.

2.1 Market Communication

Promotion is one of the four components in the famous and traditionally dominating way of viewing marketing: the 4P marketing mix (Baines, Fill & Rosengren, 2016). The model depicted in Figure 1 is used as a basis for how to coordinate marketing activities in order to gain a certain response from the market with the aim of obtaining higher demand and profitability, or to gain a strong position on the market (Kotler, Armstrong & Parment, 2017). Kotler, Armstrong and Parment (2017) describes *promotion*, or *market communication*, as how an organisation communicates their value, products and brand to consumers. They argue that well integrated market communication captures the attention of consumers and reaches the intended target group. Kotler, Armstrong and Parment (2017) describes an additional central model within marketing communication: the promotion mix. Figure 1 demonstrates how the promotion mix is a part of the overall marketing mix, and the tools the promotion mix contains. These are tools an organisation can use to communicate with the consumers in order to produce a unified message and achieve their organisational objectives: advertising, personal selling, public relations, publicity, direct marketing, and sales promotion (Kotler, Armstrong & Parment, 2017).
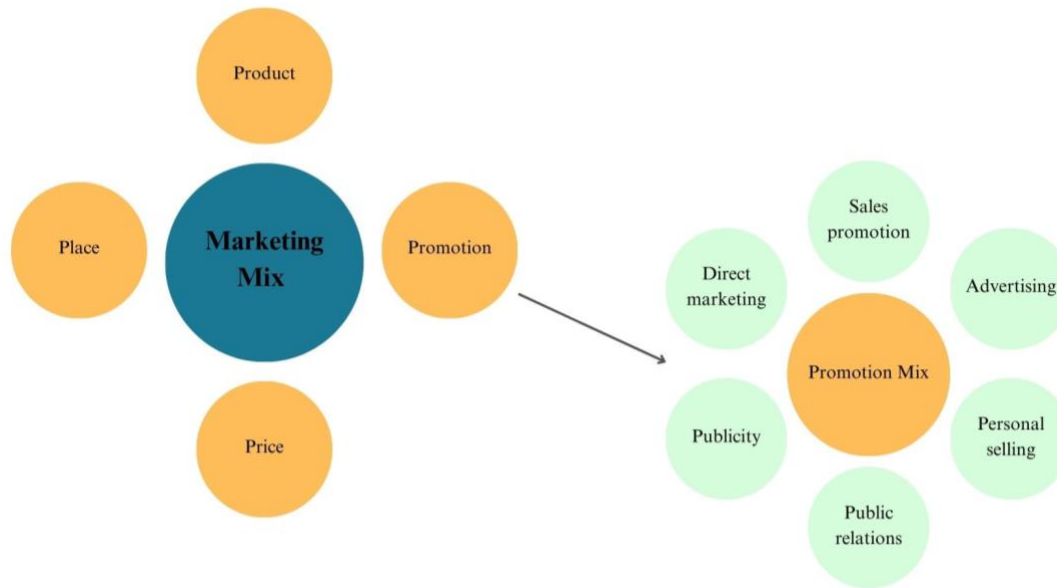
Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki & Wilner (2010) argue that the digital development of social media has changed the nature of marketing. The tools and strategies for communicating with consumers have significantly changed with the emergence of social media, also referred to as consumer generated media (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). The traditional mass communication channels, such as TV, radio and newspapers have previously been organisations' primary channel for communicating with their consumers and to express values but are no longer the dominating source of information within the media landscape (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Today, consumers instead turn to social media channels for sharing information and relationship building, which challenges the traditional promotion mix (Hair, Clark & Shapiro, 2010).

Social media is described as a forum for word-of-mouth (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Lou & Yuan, 2019) where online discourse, sponsored and unsponsored content, videos, blogs, podcast, and consumer ratings have begun to influence various aspects of consumer behaviour such as awareness, information acquisition, opinions, attitudes, purchase behaviour, and post-purchase communication and evaluation (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) argue that modern consumers are more likely to follow user-generated recommendation compared to brand-generated communication, as it offers genuine and trustworthy insights to the value of products and services, which has given word-of-mouth marketing an increasingly important role for organisations. Mangold and Faulds (2009) argue that these aspects have made social media presence and the ability to shape and impact the online interaction between consumers important for brands in order to control their narrative within the online discourse.

Social media can be used as a resource for all the activities within the promotion mix (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Mangold and Faulds (2009) argue that social media has gained a hybrid role in the

promotion mix which has two interrelated promotional roles in the marketplace. First, social media enables communication from the organisations towards their consumers. Second, it allows consumers to talk to each other (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). The word-of-mouth and peer-to-peer dominance on social media has made organisations recognise the impact of user-generated content and discourse about brands (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Many organisations are making big efforts to engage with their consumers and thus generate positive recommendations on social media (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017)). One way of connecting with the consumers on social media is through implementing influencer marketing as a part of the market communication strategy (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). As organisations want to influence the social media discourse, reach new potential consumers, create brand awareness and impact consumers' buying behaviour, highly influential people within social media are being utilised as a channel for advertising or as a communication activity (Kadekova & Holienčinová, 2018).

2.2 Celebrity Endorsements

Using highly influential people, or *celebrities*, for endorsements has been a popular strategy for promoting brands, products, and services since the emergence of marketing practices (Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2019). Advertisements are prominent tools within the promotion mix (Kotler, Armstrong & Parment, 2002) and are a common way to practically work with celebrity endorsements (Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2019). Research has shown that endorsements by a celebrity have a positive impact and significantly increase advertising effectiveness (Atkin & Block, 1983; Amos, Holmes & Strutton, 2008; Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016).

Featuring celebrities in advertising is a common practice, with celebrity endorsement constituting around 25-30% of all marketing campaigns globally (Uribe, Buzeta, Manzur & Celis, 2022). Featuring an influential person in an advertisement oftentimes aims at transferring their positive image and characteristics onto the brand, with the objective to enhance the consumers' incentive to purchase the endorsed product or service (Atkin & Block, 1983). Traditionally, celebrities such as actors, supermodels, artists, and athletes have been used as front figures for brands or been featured in campaigns to add value to the promotion (Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2019). With the growth of social media, new forms of celebrities known as social media influencers, have gained attention and recognition within marketing over the last decade (Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2019). In contrast to traditional celebrities, who presumingly gained public recognition because of their talent or professional achievements, social media influencers gain fame though branding themselves successfully on social media platforms through creating and distributing content (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017).

2.3 Influencer Marketing

The increased importance of word-of-mouth marketing due to the growth of social media has led influencers to gain attention in the modern market (Kozinets et al., 2010). Kotler, Armstrong and Parment (2017) define *word-of-mouth influence* as a form of personal communication about a product that reaches consumers through channels not directly controlled by the company. Such channels are independent experts, consumer advocates, consumer buying guides or personal contacts like neighbours, friends, or family members (Kotler, Armstrong & Parment, 2017). Research points out that the impact of the recommendation of a product or service depends on the relationship, trustworthiness and authenticity of the source (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019). In word-of-mouth marketing, everyone can be an influencer to some extent (Kozinets et al., 2010). However, only a small number of internet users can be referred to as "super-sharers" and are perceived as social media influencers (Kozinets et al., 2010). There is no unanimous definition of what criteria constitutes an influencer in literature, but it is commonly referred to as a person who gathers a large following on blogs and social media through sharing content of their personal lives and lifestyles (Abidin, 2015). They are also referred to as people who are actively trying to impact the opinions and consumption behaviours of their followers on social media and are perceived credible and inspiring within their field and target group (Nationalencyklopedin, n.d).

The term *social media influencer* can be traced back to the early 2000's and the emergence of online blog personas within fashion and beauty (Borchers, 2019), but is today a widespread social media phenomenon taking place on numerous platforms. Gustavsson (2022) argues that influencers today can be anyone posting content about any topic, such as gaming, food or even doctors. Gustavsson (2022) categorises influencers into different groups based on the size of their account determined by the amount of followers: nano influencers (1-10 thousand followers); micro influencers (10-50 thousand followers); medium influencers (50-500 thousand followers); makro (500 thousand to one million followers); and mega influencers (over 1 million followers).

As influencers have become an important part of the online discourse and people's lives, organisations have begun to recognize the possibility to reach large audiences through influencer's social media channels, paving the way for a new communication tool known as *influencer marketing* (Gustavsson, 2022; Hudders, Jans & Veirman, 2021). Influencer marketing on social media is now a multibillion-dollar industry (Ye, Hudders, De Jans & De Veirman, 2021). Organisations pay either directly to an influencer to publish endorsed content or employ an influencer marketing agency that connects them with influencers and perform influencer collaborations or endorsements in a strategic way (Backaler, 2018).

The widespread and fast adaptation of influencer marketing is commonly described as a result of the implications of using influencers rather than celebrities for endorsement (Schouten, Janssen &

Verspaget, 2019). Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget (2019) point out *credibility* and *identification* of the influencer are deciding factors that determine the effectiveness of an endorsed advert. Research has found that social media influencers not only have the power to directly influence the purchase decisions of a large audience, but their followers also find them to be reliable sources of information with high credibility (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). A study conducted by Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) found that identification arises from two primary factors: actual similarity and perceived similarity, or more simply put, the degree to which a person perceives to have things in common with another person. Additionally, they identified wishful identification as a significant aspect, which refers to the desire to be like another person. It has been found that followers often experience high identification with influencers, mostly connected to perceived similarity, which makes it an effective method to use (Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2019). According to Kelman (2006), consumer behaviour is influenced by the perception of shared interests, values, or characteristics with an endorser. When consumers believe they have things in common with an influencer, they are more inclined to adopt the influencer's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours (Kelman, 2006). This alignment leads to an increased likelihood of purchasing the products that the influencer endorses (Kelman, 2006).

2.3.1 Market Communication and Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is gaining popularity and many organisations are integrating it as a part of their overall marketing strategy or as a communication tool (Gustavsson, 2022). Influencer marketing can be included in the promotion mix in many different ways with social media presence constituting an increasingly large portion of organisations' marketing strategy and promotion efforts (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Influencers with different profiles or niches, and varying amounts of followers and engagement, are used as promotional sources to achieve different communication goals (Percy & Elliott, 2016). Popular promotional activities include endorsed advertising through the organisation's own social media platforms or communication channels, sponsored content or advertisements on the influencer's own social media platforms, collaborations on both parties' channels or product collaborations where the influencer creates products or product ranges together with the organisation (Kadekova & Holienčinová, 2018).

Kadekova and Holienčinová (2018) argue that influencer marketing activities are highly effective if done right, in comparison to other forms of digital promotion tools included in the communication mix. As technology and digital developments have made the internet riddled with advertisements that consumers actively try to ignore or block, several digital marketing tools decrease in efficiency (Kadekova & Holienčinová, 2018). Kim and Kim (2022) suggest that influencer marketing instead provides a unique proposition by allowing advertisements to seamlessly integrate into the content that consumers actively seek out for inspiration, information, and community engagement. This approach breaks through the noise and makes it highly challenging for consumers to overlook or ignore the promotional messages (Kim & Kim, 2022).

These factors along with the high level of trust, loyalty and influence between the influencer and their followers, makes influencer marketing a promotional activity with high profitable potential (Kim & Kim, 2022).
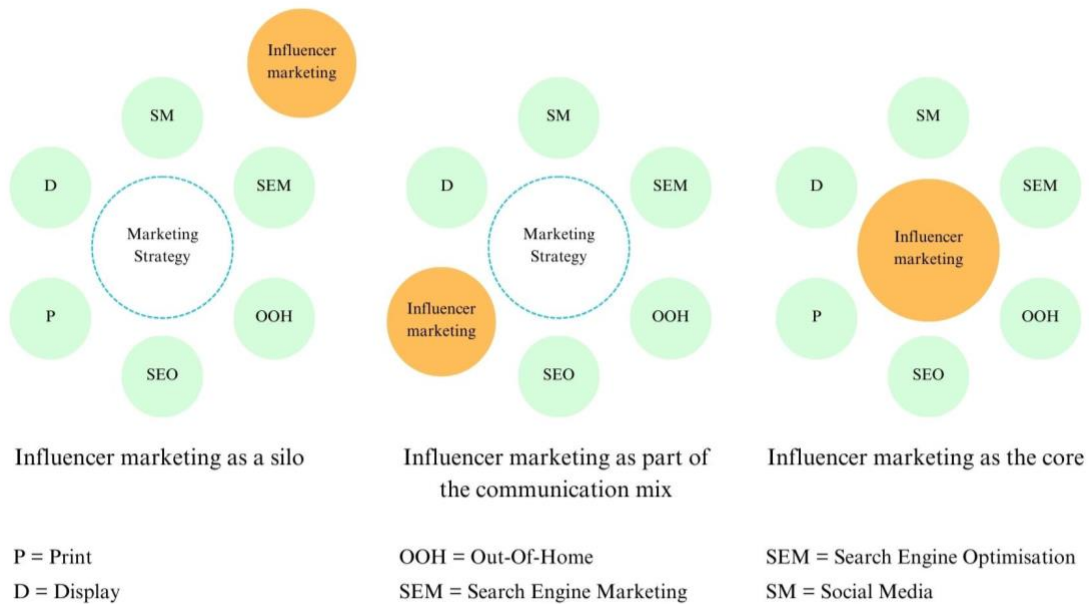
Figure 2: Influencer Marketing as a Part of the Marketing Strategy, adapted Gustavsson (2022)

Figure 2 illustrates Gustavsson's (2022) three strategies for implementing influencer marketing in a marketing strategy. These strategies are: influencer marketing as a silo (1), influencer marketing as a part of the communication mix (2) and influencer marketing as the core (3) (Gustavsson, 2022). The first strategy, influencer marketing as a silo, involves performing a small amount of influencer marketing activities as a complement to other marketing activities such as printed ads, social media marketing or displays, often with the goal of achieving short term goals (Gustavsson, 2022). Gustavsson (2022) argues that organisations that use this strategy often miss out on other benefits of using influencer marketing, such as brand recognition and relationship building with their target group. Influencer marketing as a part of the communication mix is a strategy where organisations instead incorporate influencer marketing into their communication mix, alongside other marketing channels (Gustavsson, 2022). Gustavsson (2022) argues that if this is done right, the different promotional channels affect each other in a positive way and create a long-term recognition. Organisations that use influencer marketing as the core of their marketing strategy integrate influencers in their marketing activities overall, both in terms of sponsored posts on the influencers' social media channels, but also integrated in tv-, radio-, or printed advertisement. These are often referred to as *influencer made* and are becoming increasingly common, especially within the e-commerce industry (Gustavsson, 2022).

2.3.1.1 The Influencer Marketing Industry Process

The process of purchasing influencer marketing activities or campaigns most commonly start with an organisation, here referred to as advertisers, sending out a request containing their target group or the values they want to communicate, to either a bureau or network (Gustavsson, 2022). Figure 3 illustrates how the request from the advertiser is processed through the different steps. Gustavsson (2022) points out that there are three different types of bureaus that can account for the second step in the process: media bureaus, advertising bureaus or influencer marketing bureaus. The bureaus' primary mission is to support the organisation with strategic decisions in terms of which activities and influencers are appropriate, as well as supply creative material and produce advertising campaigns (Gustavsson, 2022). Influencer marketing bureaus have become increasingly popular. Here, influencers take a central part of the campaigns.
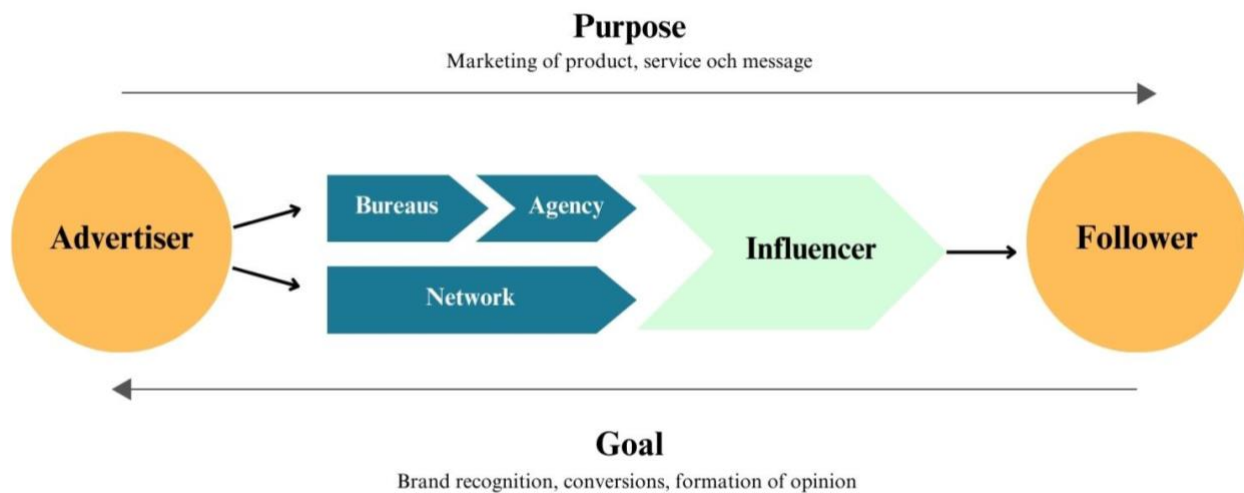
Figure 3: The Influencer Marketing Industry: Stakeholders' interplay and stream

Agencies are other important actors within the influencer marketing industry. They are often described as a middleman between advertisers and influencers (Gustavsson, 2022). Many influencers are represented by an agency that receives incoming requests, manages bookings, negotiates terms and prices, and writes contracts (Gustavsson, 2022). An advertiser or bureau that has come up with an influencer marketing campaign concept or idea involving an influencer represented by the agency contacts them with their request. The agency later contacts the influencer that either agrees or disagrees to do the campaign. If the influencer agrees, the negotiation period starts and contracts are written (Gustavsson, 2022).

Advertisers can also reach influencers through a network. Gustavsson (2022) describes networks as more of an all-round service that take the role of both the bureau and agency providing both

campaigns for the advertisers while at the same time representing the influencers. Lastly, the influencer is the last step put central part of the industry process, creating content for the advertiser though their platforms, the advertiser's platform, or both (Gustavsson, 2022). All these actors in the industry process interact. Figure 3 illustrates the general goal of the advertiser is to market their product, service of message though the influencer, while the goal from the direction of the influencer is to create brand recognition, conversions, and formation of opinion for the advertisers in return (Gustavsson, 2022).

The influencer marketing industry is pointed out as volatile and under constant developments, due to its early age and agile pace (Taylor, 2020). The industry's dependency on social media developments and the external environment is argued to make best practices and research on the industry hard to conduct (Taylor, 2020). Ye et al. (2021) argue that the adaption of the process of influencer marketing has been a result of trial-and-error, rather than a strategic choice of way forward, as a result of the volatility of social media and fast popularity of influencers. Taylor (2020) points out to the covid-19 pandemic, new platforms, social media trends and increased trust and use of social media by new generations as developments that have advanced the popularity and effectiveness of influencer marketing.

2.3.2 Influencer Marketing, Brand Identity and Brand Image

Kapferer (2012) describes brand identity as a set of tangible and intangible characteristics that allow consumers to recognise the organisation as a unique entity. These characteristics or collection of elements represents their brand's personality, values, and other attributes (Kapferer, 2012). This includes the brand name, logo, visual identity, tone of voice and messaging (Kapferer, 2012). Kapferer (2012) suggests that brand identity should be represented by the following characteristics: physic, relationship, reflection, personality, culture, and self-image. A strong brand identity helps to differentiate a brand from its competitors and provides direction and purpose through all marketing activities (Greyser & Urde, 2019). Having a clear and unified brand identity articulated and communicated is important in order to create a memorable impression in the minds of consumers, referred to as brand image. While Kapferer (2012) refers to brand identity as the sender's side, he defines brand image as the perception of the brand from the receiver side - the consumer. Achieving congruity between the brand identity and brand image is a determining factor for the success of a brand (Kapferer, 2012).

The fit between the influencer's values and messages, and the brand identity of the organisation has been pointed out as determining factors for the success of influencer marketing (Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2019). When the values and messages of the influencer align with the brand identity of the organisation, content appears authentic and can reinforce brand values and reach audiences who are likely to resonate with those values (Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2019). Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget (2019) found a correlation between brand purchase intention and

brand fit when the fit was determined to be moderate or good. However, brand attractiveness was not found to be affected by brand fit. Lee, Chang, and Zhang (2022) found that general attitude toward an ad is affected by the fit between an influencer and a product, and is partially based on consumers' judgement of the influencer's expertise. Thus, the choices of which influencer should align with their personal brands and fit with the values, position and message the brand wants to achieve and communicate to their consumer to achieve a clear brand image (Lee, Chang & Zhang, 2022).

2.3.3 Establishing and Leveraging Associations

The ability to recall brands and construct beneficial associations have long been the focus for marketers with a background in cognitive psychology, and associative network theory has been applied in a marketing context by many researchers (Cornwell, Humphreys & Kwon, 2022; Till & Shimp, 1998; Um & Kim, 2016; Keller, 2020). The underlying assumption to the theory is that the memory of the consumer is built upon nodes, or cues, which are connected to one another through an associative network and can be activated upon directly by exposure to stimuli or indirectly through an associative link. Within the theoretical context of associative networks, both influencers and brands constitute respective nodes which through repeated and visible collaboration become linked to one another through association (Till & Shimp, 1998). Once this link is established in the mind of the consumer, it can be difficult to break (Um & Kim, 2016). According to Um and Kim (2016), the strength of said link between a profile and a brand is determined by "the advertising message exposure, brand/product involvement, likability of the celebrity endorser, duration of the celebrity endorsement, as well as many other factors." (p. 867). The strength of the associative link between the influencer is largely susceptible to the same factors as for the celebrity, and will vary greatly from an influencer who has done a single sponsored post to an influencer who has been a brand ambassador for several years. As suggested by Keller (2020), it is primarily the knowledge of the link and the thoughts and feelings towards the link which determines the outcome of an associative link.

From an associative network perspective, employing influencer marketing as a market communication strategy result in the brand of the influencer and the brand itself to become linked through the consumer's associative network (Cornwell, Humphreys & Kwon, 2022). The inclusion in each other's associative network is often perceived as a positive outcome of a collaboration, as argued by Cornwell, Humphreys and Kwon (2022), introducing the concept of *shared brand equity.* Shared brand equity can be understood as: "the extent to which semantic/associative knowledge between brands is linked, is widely represented in a linguistic community, and affects community member brand responses (e.g., expectations, predictions, decisions)" (Cornwell, Humphreys & Kwon, 2022, p. 3). The concept of shared brand equity has its underpinnings in brand associations, which is furthermore central for understanding the incentives of influencer marketing (Cornwell, Humphreys & Kwon, 2022).

By applying shared brand equity to the context of influencer marketing, the associative link to an influencer is incentivised by the gain of favourable attributes from the influencer. The wish to sustain shared brand equity with an influencer is in practice illustrated by the visibility and repetition of public interaction between the influencer and the brand (Keller, 2020). Keller (2020) emphasises that actively interconnecting brands in this manner is an effort for both parts to mutually enhance their own equity. First, constructing associative links to other brands will increase the likelihood of a consumer recalling your brand which enhances brand salience and thus brand awareness (Keller, 2020). Second, the associations can be leveraged to transfer positive attributes and connotations of the other to oneself, such as performance, imagery, judgements, feelings, and resonance (Keller, 2020). For an influencer, these attributes and connotations relate to the influencer's visibility, credibility, attractiveness, and power (Percy & Elliott, 2016). However, merely focusing on these incentives does not acknowledge the intrinsically complex nature of associative networks due to the respective nodes being adjoined to subsets of other links (Till & Shimp, 1998). It is also important for managers not to neglect the possibility of retracting the negative attributions and connotations of the other brand, which can instead negatively affect brand equity (Till & Shimp, 1998; Um & Kim, 2016).

2.4 The Emergence and Implications of Cancel Culture

Cancelling can be seen as a contemporary, digital antecedent to blacklisting and boycotting (Clark, 2020; Lokhande & Natu, 2022). In cancel culture, a group or person whose behaviour has caused a scandal is excluded from relationships and markets they were previously a part of (Clark, 2020). Although all stakeholders can participate in cancel culture, it is often the general public on social media which exerts pressure on other stakeholders to exclude the cancelled entity or individual (Tandoc et al., 2022). As Clark (2020) highlights, exclusion of an individual from the market is not a new phenomenon, but is a familiar mediated process enabled by power, time and access. However, on the internet this process is accelerated by social medias' ability for large groups of people to collectively participate, mobilise and sustain resistance (Lokhande & Natu, 2022). The threshold for social media users to participate in cancel culture is low due the anonymity ensured on social media and the ease of engaging through a simple click (Tandoc et al., 2022). As argued by Ng (2020), these aforementioned abilities are enabled and made intrinsically complex by the specific characteristics of social media, such as the vast dissemination of (mis)information and algorithmic cultures.

In academic discipline, cancel culture is still a novel term and a precise mapping of how the process progresses is yet to be entirely established. What is found in research, is that the catalyst of cancel culture is often grounded in ideological convictions, and aims to exert normative power enforcing the general perception of acceptable behaviour (Norris, 2021; Saint-Louis, 2021; Velasco, 2021).

In a study by Norris (2021) it was found that people of conservative ideological conviction were more likely to experience a cancellation, suggesting that cancellations are more likely to be exerted by people of left political beliefs. But as Velasco (2021) points out, what is perceived as acceptable is ambiguous and ever changing yet made possible by a "virtual collective consciousness", where people online participate in discourse regarding morality and truth (Lewis & Christin, 2022). Velasco (2021) draws a critical parallel to an echo-chamber, whilst Norris (2021) makes the comparison to that of a spiral of silence. The authors are not the only ones expressing concerns regarding the implications of cancel culture, the critical approach is recurring in research on the phenomenon, with many claiming that it counteracts democratic processes by sustaining a discourse dominated by censorship (Norris, 2021; Saint-Louis, 2021; Velasco, 2021).

But within the growing body of research addressing cancel culture, distinctively different perspectives are emerging. There are also voices claiming that the emergence of cancel culture is a democratic development, illustrating a power shift from an elite social class to the general public (Clark, 2020). People abiding by this perspective perceive an occurred "cancellation" as an exaction of accountability for moral wrongdoings (Tandoc et al., 2022; Lewis & Christin, 2022), and can by participants be perceived as a type of activism (Clark, 2020; Lokhande & Natu, 2022). This perspective more so provides insight to the intent behind cancel culture and provides an understanding of how the phenomenon emerged.

Scholars within the field of behavioural and psychological research call for further attention to the micro perspective exploring the implications on individuals affected by the cancel culture (Lokhande & Natu, 2022). Researcher from this perspective examines the consequences on mental health, not only of people directly affected by cancel culture, but also of the oftentimes young observers and participants (Shuraeva & Korinets, 2023). Here, cancel culture is seen as resembling public humiliation, repression, and marginalisation (Lokhande & Natu, 2022).

2.4.1 The Cancelled Influencer

Beyond these theoretical macro and micro perspectives, there are the managerial perspectives of those experiencing the practical implications of cancel culture. Individuals targeted by cancel culture are public figures, and different types of public figures may experience different consequences of being cancelled (Tandoc et al., 2022). For example, a politician might experience withdrawn support from voters whilst a profiled CEO might lose their executive position (Tandoc et al., 2022). One group of public figures which have often become a target of cancellation are influencers (Lewis & Christin, 2020). In their study of cancellations on the social media platform YouTube, Lewis and Christin (2020) found that cancel culture of influencers is largely symbolic: "they become rituals in which accountability is publicly performed, bringing its share of entertainment to online audiences, even as none of these contradictions are ultimately resolved." (p. 1651). Nonetheless, the implications for the influencers proved often, even if momentary,

detrimental to their careers (Lewis & Christin, 2020). In literature, there are three recurring consequences for influencers that have experienced targeting of cancel culture: *loss of followers*, *damage to brand* and *terminated collaborations*.

1) Loss of followers. One common course of action frequently adapted by the public during an cancellation of an influencer is retrieving their support by unfollowing their profile on platforms. As argued by Tandoc et al. (2022), an unfollowing can be seen as a passive boycott enabled by the digital context. Active boycotts are also prevalent in cancel culture and are expressed in public discontent and through encouraging others to unsubscribe to the influencer (Tandoc et al., 2022). Active boycotts through establishing and distributing hashtags aiming at unfollowing an influencer can gain massive support and sometimes even become trending on platforms (Lokhande & Natu, 2022; Ahuja & Kerketta, 2021). Hence, both passive and active followers can participate in this type of cancelling, consequently causing the end result to often be a significant loss of followers.

2) Damage to brand. As argued by Giertz, Hollebeek, Weiger and Hammerschmidt (2022), influencers are brands, and for many contexts they need to be studied as such. However, there are distinct features of an influencer's brand which make them unique and arguably more vulnerable than other brands. Giertz et al. (2022) argue that the unique proposition of influencers stems from the personal character of the influencer, and that their value for followers and collaborative partners alike is largely built on their perceived credibility and trustworthiness. In cancel culture, these attributes are vulnerable and conditional. As stated by Abbasi et al. (2022): "cancel culture is the idea that if you do something that people deem problematic, you will automatically lose all your credibility and trust" (p. 47). Without credibility and trust, an influencer will lose their authority for shared brand equity, as this constitutes their value proposition towards collaborative stakeholders (Cornwell, Humphreys & Kwon, 2022). Among the key stakeholder group of followers, feelings toward an influencer can go beyond simple discontent (Abbasi el al., 2022). The high identification with influencers, which is a central component of the parasocial relationship between the follower and influencer (Wei, Chen, Ramirez, Jeon & Sun, 2022), can cause followers to experience cognitive dissonance when an influencer is cancelled. The high personal involvement creates strong incentives to participate, or actively not participate, in the execution of the influencer's brand.

3) *Terminated collaborations*. A significant stream of income for professional influencers are collaborations with brands. Cancel culture implicates a liability in the influencers personal brand as illustrated by the point above, which constitutes damage to not only the influencers brand but also to the brands which have become affiliated through collaborations. Due to public pressure, brands are often required to take action towards the influencer (Kintu & Ben-Slimane, 2020). Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020) found that brands can terminate their collaborations with influencers after a scandalous incident employing several different strategies: proactive dissociation, reactive dissociation, and mimetic dissociation. Proactive dissociation is achieved by a rapid response in

which the brand actively distances themselves from the influencer by condemning their actions publicly. Reactive dissociation also takes place publicly but is not as rapid and is often in response to the public pressure. Mimetic dissociation is also in response to pressure but does not distance themselves from the influencer through public statements but rather through action, such as replacing the influencer in campaigns (Kintu & Ben-Slimane, 2020). Either type of dissociation is a loss for the influencer and will impact not only current stream of income but can also have future equity of the influencer, as associated brands also build brand equity for the influencer (Cornwell, Humphreys & Kwon, 2022).

2.4.2 Cancelled by Association

With cancel culture yet being a novel concept within research, its effect on brands employing influencer marketing is still limited. There is however, a significant amount of academic articles addressing the effects of celebrity endorsers in the context of celebrity transgressions, which can provide useful insights to the relationship between influencers and brands in cancel culture (Till & Shrimp, 1998; Kittel & Stango, 2014; Um & Kim, 2016). In a study conducted in 1998, Till and Shimp (1998) found that negative information about celebrities can negatively affect the brand of the endorsed partner through the associative networks in the minds of the consumers. Through repeated advertising with celebrities, their study found that an associative link was established between the brand and the celebrities in the mind of the consumer and could be an exceptionally efficient way of building brand equity for the brand. However, the authors postulated potential invert risk, where cases of negative information about celebrities had a negative effect on the brand equity of the associated brand. In cases where the consumer already had strong associations to the brand, the negative effect was marginal, but for unknown brands the risk was significant (Till & Shrimp, 1998).

A study by Kittel and Stango (2014) found evidentiary support that even brands with high brand salience can be affected by negative information. By observing the stock prices of brands associated with golfer Tiger Woods at the peak of his scandal, the authors found a significant decrease in market value for large brands. They argue that brands with especially strong associations suffered more negative impact, and do not argue as Till and Shimp (1998), that it is primarily the previous knowledge of the brand that determined the impact. Um and Kim (2016) suggests that the effect of the association is determined by the congruence between the negative information and brand, the strength of the association and the consumers brand commitment, in ways encompassing the findings of both Till and Shimp (1998) and Kittel and Stango (2014). Providing yet another dimension to this, Louie and Obenmiller (2002) found that it was the extent to which the celebrity involved in the negative incidents was blameless or blameworthy in the situation which determined how consumer's associations to the associated brand were affected. Zhou and Whitla (2013) similarly suggest that it is the type and extent of moral misconduct exhibited by the celebrity which determined its effect on associated brands.

The above-mentioned articles are set over a sixteen-year span, and are susceptible to different factors, such as digital developments, societal trends and changes in consumer culture. As suggested by Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020), the speed of dissemination of information and farsightedness on social media arguably makes the management post negative events more complex today. Nonetheless, it can be concluded that evaluations of risk related to celebrity endorsements is not novel in literature. With the case of cancel culture and social media influencers, several parallels can be drawn. Just as with celebrities, influencers become entangled with the brands they collaborate with (Giertz et al., 2022). Influencers are acting in a more fast-paced and farsighted environment but share characteristics with celebrities (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017). Hence, many earlier findings are transferable to the modern relationship between influencers and organisations.

A recent study by Giertz et al. (2022) suggests that associations to influencers might be even more entangled than those with celebrities. Whilst collaborations with celebrities rely on their role as "messenger", collaborations with influencers more often rely on them as "message creators", according to Giertz et al. (2022). The risks implicated by this were high in situations where influencers exhibited morally questionable behaviour (Giertz et al., 2022). Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020) explored the instance of *scandal spillover* on brands working with influencers caught up in a scandal. A scandal is often a transgression of some sort which results in boycott not only of the influencer but of associated brands (Kintu & Ben-Slimane, 2020). By the authors definition of a scandal, it can be said that a scandal is a catalyst for a cancellation, positioning the study within cancel culture. What the study found was that brands are often required to take action towards the influencer to avoid becoming collateral damage, and that managers should consider the risk of potential scandal spillover prior to engaging in influencer marketing. Singh, Crisafulli, Quamina and Xue (2020) investigated the reversed situation of a brand being cancelled due to misconduct and attempting to leverage an association to an influencer to redeem their brand. It was found that utilising influencers in this manner negatively impacted both the brand and the influencer. Inferences of influencers often had a negative impact on the brand, as it awoke suspicions of manipulation and lack of trustworthiness on the brand's part. This furthermore illustrates the mutual risks of linking brands in an associative network.

2.5 Decision Making in Influencer Marketing

Whilst brands are not shy to turn to influencers for increasing awareness and engagement in their brand (Mangold & Faulds, 2009), the managerial foundation for making decisions regarding influencer marketing is often slim. Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Giordano and Lopez-Lopez (2020) suggest that the two central decisions required prior to engaging in influencer marketing are: *selecting an influencer* and *selecting the format of the collaboration*. In regard to selecting an

influencer, the two most important considerations are the extent of celebrity as well as their congruence with the brand, based on the respective brand identities. Suggestively, this is also where the evaluation of the shared brand equity for involved parties would take place (Cornwell, Humphreys & Kwon, 2022). Martínez-López et al. (2020) argue that collaborative partners should not stare themselves blind on the follower amount; although influencers with a large following are effective in providing visibility for prospective consumers, smaller, niche influencers are often more effective in converting consumers due to their expertise and relationship with their audience.

In regard to the format of the collaboration, the control over the brand and commercial orientation of the message needs to be established (Martínez-López et al., 2020). Martínez-López et al. (2020) found that commercial messages were ineffective as they decreased credibility. It was therefore suggested as beneficial to give influencers creative freedom, with certain limitations, when creating messages for their audience (Martínez-López et al., 2020). The extent of how visibly the brands wish to be associated with each other, short and long term would also be an important strategic consideration to be made at this stage (Keller, 2020).

Additionally, Lin, Bruning and Swaenda (2018) provide a five-step planning process to guide managers through decision making in matching suitable influencers with organisations for influencer marketing purposes. The first step in the framework suggests that managers should start by establishing the *objective* for the campaign and intention with the influencer (Lin, Bruning & Swaenda, 2018). Second is *recognition*, where they identify potential influencers and in the third step, *alignment,* ensure that the influencer's message and values match the product or service the organisation wants to promote (Lin, Bruning & Swaenda, 2018). Fourth is *motivation*, which is where suitable compensation, such as payment or free products, should be assigned to the influencer (Lin, Bruning & Swaenda, 2018). Lin, Bruning and Swaenda (2018) argue that the influencer should be rewarded in a way that aligns with their social role, meaning that compensation could be anything from attention, to product involvement, discounts or other monetary rewards that match their values and message to ensure continued authenticity and desire to keep working with the organisation. The last step is *coordination*, where organisations negotiate, support, and monitor the influencer and the endorsement.

2.5.1 Mitigating Risk Through Decision Making

Several authors (Backaler, 2018; Kintu & Ben-Slimane, 2020; Kittel & Stango, 2014; Giertz et al., 2022) call for more attention to the risk evaluation of influencer marketing as an integrated part of the decision-making process. There are tangible risks involved with collaborating with influencers, such as the legal risk of the influencers not disclosing the paid advertisement or the influencer being deceptive about their numbers (Backaler, 2018). Although these risks could cause financial damage, this impact would likely be momentary and not comparable to the reputational risk influencer marketing could potentially constitute (Bishop, 2021). Giertz et al. (2022) suggests that

organisations should consider stakeholders beyond just consumers when employing influencer marketing and not to get lost within marketing metrics, as the relationship with stakeholders such as employees, suppliers and shareholders could potentially suffer from an influencer collaboration gone wrong. Consequences could result in consumers boycotting the organisation's products or services (Ahuja & Kerketta, 2021), employees quitting (Kintu & Ben-Slimane, 2020) or even a significant decrease in market value (Kittel & Stango, 2014).

A common measure to mitigate these risks involved with influencer marketing are legal precautions (Gustavsson, 2022). These contracts often ensure that parties uphold their part of the collaboration and make them legally liable if they were to breach the contract (Gustavsson, 2022). Although the risk of reputational damage is often addressed in legal contracts, clauses are oftentimes vaguely formulated and could be difficult to enact (Bishop, 2021).

According to Bishop (2021), larger brands often calculate the risk of an influencer prior to committing to them for influencer marketing purposes. Presenting evidentiary support, Bishop (2021) found that many organisations quantify the risk of a specific influencer by the metric of brand safety, a widely recognised yet fuzzy inference. The author defines it as: "a positive reproduction of a brand's ideals, an avoidance of controversy, and a circumvention of sex, violence and profanity" (p. 4). The three latter contents were thus identified as the risk for the associated brand. The author also notes the risk of the influencer being cancelled as constituting risk for the associated brand. Bishop (2021) claims that many organisations calculate brand safety with algorithms, which through screening content is able to give it a brand safety score, often based on keywords. This was found to make the calculation of brand safety an automated decision-making process, which is often biassed and misleading due to its inability to read context. Thus, Bishop (2021) concludes that more transparency about the function of algorithms is required to legitimise such risk mitigation practices. Rather, decisions to mitigate risks for influencer marketing might require manual labour, as suggested by Backaler (2018) who emphasises the importance of acquiring first-hand knowledge of the influencer's previous professional and personal endeavours. Backaler (2018) suggests that this thorough research process should be an integrated part of the decision-making process, as this ensures the influencer's fit with the brand of the organisation as well as it could identify potential liabilities with the influencer.

There is currently a lack of research addressing potential reactive strategies for mitigating the reputational risk for organisations when an incident has already occurred. It is feasible though, that crisis communication would be applicable to an extent, as scholars such as Greyser (2009) found unfavourable associations to a profile to constitute a brand crisis requiring a response. These brand crisis management emphasise that the situational factors should determine the appropriate response and much like argued by Louie and Obenmiller (2002), and Zhou and Whitla (2013), limiting the perceived agency of the organisation in the situation and leveraging an already strong reputation can mitigate the risks of the brand suffering damage in cases of an associated profile being guilty

of misconduct. Similarly, crisis communication scholars Coombs and Holladay (1996) describe the attribution of responsibility to be central for deciding an appropriate response, claiming that crisis situations caused by external stakeholders should be ascribed as such.

Risks with influencer marketing are not possible for organisations to entirely eradicate; exerting too much control over the content produced presents a corresponding risk of the content not appearing authentic to followers (Giertz et al., 2022). Influencers present a liability due to their inherent, at times flawed, human nature and the scrutiny of cancel culture. As Um and Kim (2016) argue, the personal lives of profiles are beyond the control of organisations and "occasional poor judgment, ill-advised behavior, or controversial stands" (p. 872) will always be an inherent risk of working with profiles.

3 Conceptual Framework

The following conceptual framework was constructed from the theories of the previous section and aims to structure the research when exploring how the emergence of cancel culture is affecting the perceptions and experiences of working with influencer marketing. Namely, the figure illustrates the sequence of an influencer experiencing cancel culture. The conceptual framework corresponds to previous findings in literature through integrating and connecting theoretical concepts.
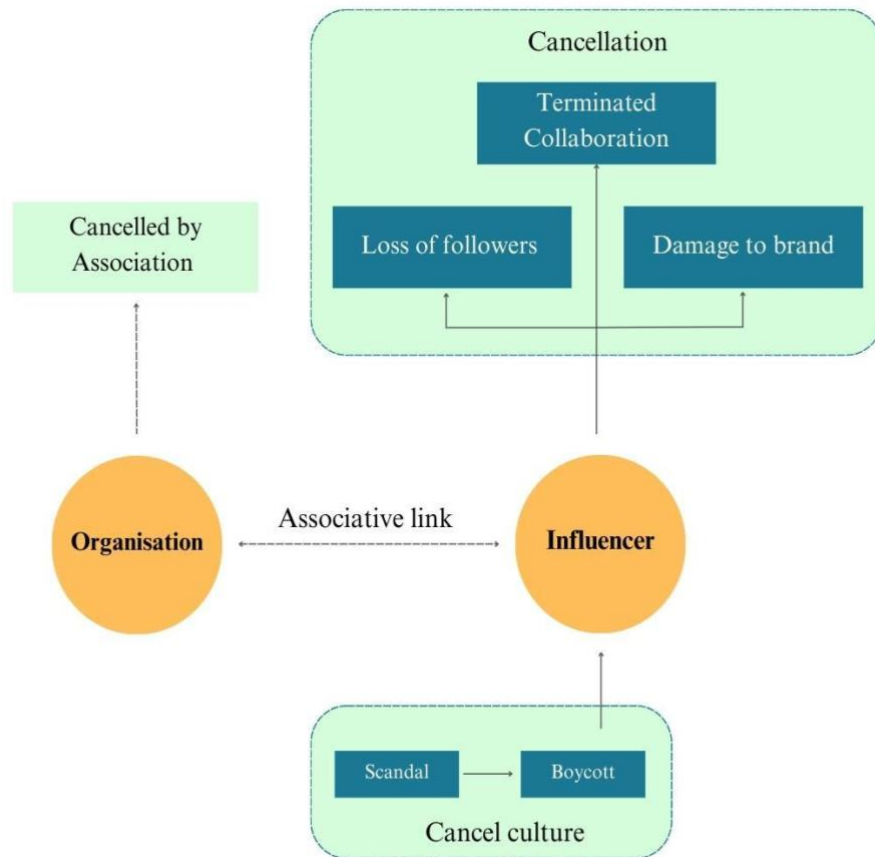
Figure 4: Conceptual Framework

Figure 4 illustrates *cancel culture* as the process of a *scandal* catalysing a *boycott*. Although there are a multitude of underlying factors enabling cancel culture as a phenomenon, these have been condensed to two amalgamated processes for the sake of the model. Furthermore, the direct effects of cancel culture on the influencer are illustrated, through a *cancellation*, which is characterised by *loss of followers*, *terminated collaborations* and *damage to brand*.

Figure 4 suggests that the *associative link* between the organisation and influencer can cause cancel culture to spill over on the organisation's brand. This risk of spill over is mutual. The risk of being cancelled by association is enabled by the connection between the organisation and the influencer but is determined by the strength of the connections. Even if the relationship between the influencer and organisation was to be mediated by an agency or bureau, the associative link is direct between the brand and influencer, as this is the relationship visible to the public.

This study aims at understanding how risk is perceived by the organisation as well as to understand how said risk is mitigated. For the first aim, the parts of Figure 4 which are of interest are the dotted lines: the *associative link* as well as *cancelled by association*. For the second aim, different parts of the figures could serve a purpose whether the strategy for mitigating risk is proactive or reactive. Hence, if they aim at stopping an influencer from being cancelled or if they aim to prevent a cancelled influencer causing the organisation to become cancelled by association. The risk of cancel culture, if mitigated proactively, would aim at blocking the entire sequence from initiating. If mitigated reactively, it would instead aim at blocking the sequence at the associative link, to ensure that an already cancelled influencer does not have a spill-over effect on the organisation's brand.

4 Method

This section aims at providing a transparent disclosure of how the study was conducted and to critically discuss the choices made in regard to the data collection and analysis. The first section accounts for the underlying philosophical assumptions of the study. The second section outlines how the data collection was performed, and the third section describes how this collected data was further analysed. Lastly, the quality of the research was critically discussed according to established quality variables.

4.1 Research Philosophy

In this section, the philosophical assumption underlying the research process begins with the ontological and epistemological considerations made to establish the data collection method. Additionally, the research approach is introduced and the reasoning for using an abductive and qualitative approach is accounted for and elaborated on.

4.1.1 Ontological & Epistemological Considerations

Before determining which data collection method is most appropriate, it is necessary to consider the philosophical assumptions that will be held through the research process (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson & Jaspersen, 2021). The ontological and epistemological presumptions on which the research is based were important to establish before constructing the research method. Ontology represents the basic assumptions that the researcher makes about the nature of reality (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Here, researchers ask themselves: *what is reality?* (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This study holds a *relativistic* approach to ontology, meaning that scientific laws are seen as created by people who are embedded in a context (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Thus, reality is seen as through the eyes of the beholder (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Perceptions regarding the risk of cancel culture for influencer marketing are regarded as true to individuals, and truth depends on the viewpoint of the observer in the context of their experience.

Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) describe epistemology as the assumption about the correct way of acquiring knowledge of the world. This study held a *social constructivist* approach to epistemology and views reality as a social construction; how reality appears is defined by people, not by external and unbiased elements (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This study aimed to understand the different experiences that people have of the emergence of cancel culture and its effects on organisations and professionals who work with influencer marketing, rather than examining the external causes and fundamental laws that explained the behaviours or changes.

As the perception and experiences of cancel culture are subjective for the individual, or constructed by opinions within the organisation, the data was gathered with the presumption that it is a representation of the individual's subjective accounts rather than a reflection of an objective truth. It should furthermore be noted that the occupational role of the participants might have created incentives for them to respond in a way that portrays themselves and their employer in a positive light (Alvesson, 2003).

4.1.2 Abductive Reasoning

The study undertook an exploratory nature to analyse and understand the phenomenon of cancel culture within the context of influencer marketing professionals' perspectives and experiences, all while making contributions to current theories and literature. The study thus combined deductive and inductive approaches to follow an abductive approach (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

Abductive reasoning was deemed most appropriate reasoning for this study, due to the nature of the phenomenon. Although cancel culture is a frequently observed phenomenon by researchers, its theoretical foundation is yet inadequate due to its early age. Brinkman and Kvale (2014) suggest that abductive reasoning is best suited for studies addressing phenomena which require challenging perspectives, as the iterative process allows the researcher to make inferences from an ambiguous theoretical foundation to postulate new theory. In accordance with abductive reasoning, the research question and interview questions were anchored in existing theoretical literature examining its correlation to reality, but also to offer new findings that have an impact on the theoretical framework (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

4.1.3 Qualitative Methodology

This study followed a qualitative research design consisting of primary data collection. As the aim of this paper was to explore the perceptions and experiences of cancel culture, a qualitative approach was deemed a suitable choice. Qualitative studies often stem from a relativist and social constructionist research philosophy and focus on how individuals perceive and experience an identified phenomenon (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). To answer the research questions and understand how cancel culture is affecting the influencer marketing industry, a deeper understanding of the perceptions held by industry professionals must be obtained. Utilising verbal methods (Patel & Davidson, 2019) allowed the researchers to delve into the perceptions and experiences of those involved to understand the phenomenon for the context of influencer marketing. Qualitative research thus enabled the capturing and analysis of subjective perceptions and experiences (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

4.2 Data Collection

To fulfil the purpose of this study and answer the research question, the perspectives of professionals with experience of influencer marketing were required to testify to how the emergence of cancel culture is affecting their perceptions and experiences in practice. For this purpose, semi-structured interviews were deemed as the most appropriate method for data collection.

During the process of determining which data collection method would be most appropriate for the purpose of this study, other methods were also considered. The phenomenon of cancel culture could present interesting observations from both ethnographic and netnographic settings, such as through exploring the behaviour of organisations in instances of an influencer being cancelled, however, it would not have provided access to the perceptions and experiences of the respondents (Bryman & Bell, 2017). As this study took interest in perceptions and experiences of cancel culture for professionals working with influencer marketing, the surface level of observations would not suffice.

Focus groups, where a specific group of respondents are gathered to discuss their thoughts and opinions (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021), was considered an alternative. However, this data collection method was found to not align with the purpose of the study, as it was the narrative of the individuals which was of interest and the component of discourse could distract from this. Furthermore, the group setting could potentially negatively impact the authenticity of individuals' narratives, as cancel culture can be perceived as a sensitive topic for organisations to disclose openly. As suggested by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), one-on-one interviews are preferable in situations which aim to exclude the social pressure exerted by a group, thus, it was determined as most appropriate for this study.

However, several scholars (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Kvale, 1994) point to limitations of using semi-structured interviews as the data collection method. As the respondents participating in this study represented organisations, a hesitance to transparently disclose feelings and thoughts was prevalent, as the respondents likely wanted to project a favourable image of their organisations. However, this risk was deemed higher for other potential data collection methods, such as focus groups which include social pressure from several people. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that the presence of the researchers could potentially introduce a bias in the respondents' responses, as their answers may be assimilated to the researchers' perceived interests (Kvale, 1994). To mitigate this effect, the researchers strived to maintain a neutral stance and demonstrate an unbiased yet genuine interest in the narratives shared by the respondents.

4.2.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

The interviews were semi-structured, meaning that researchers can maintain a flexible approach while adhering to predetermined limits of the interview (Bryman & Bell, 2017). The preparation for semi-structured interviews often involves constructing an interview guide which establishes what grounds need to be covered, however, the researcher retains the option of changing the formulation and sequence of questions according to their intuition (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The flexibility allows the researcher to not disrupt respondents' narrative, pursue potential leads, and generate greater depth with follow-up questions, making it suitable for explorative studies such as this one. Furthermore, the flexibility aligns with the abductive reasoning of the study, as it allows for the interviewer to iterate between confirmability of previous inferences and the pursuit of challenging, and further developing, previous inferences. The analysis is thus continuously performed throughout the preparations and conduction of the interview.

The flexible format of the interview is furthermore to ensure comfort for the participant, and to promote an open and natural dialogue. As highlighted by Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019), semi-structured interviews are preferable for attaining "a genuine understanding of the world views of members of a social setting or of people sharing common attributes" (p. 436). As this study aims at gaining the perception of professionals, said genuine understanding is required. By withholding flexibility, respondents are provided the opportunity to control the orientation of the interview and are not as exposed to the presumptions of the researchers.

4.2.2 Sampling

The participants for this study were selected from an established set of criteria, thus making the sampling strategy purposive (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). All people interviewed for the study are working professionally with influencer marketing and can be segmented into two groups. The first group are those who work with influencer marketing in-house. The two sampling criteria for this group were that: the participants were employed at an organisation that works with influencer marketing in their market communication (1), and that their role at the organisation was directly related to influencer marketing, or indirectly related to influencer marketing through working with market communication (2). The second group works with influencer marketing through a consultant role. The sampling criteria for this group was employment at a marketing or communication bureau (1) and expertise in influencer marketing (2). Other criteria, such as the demographics of the respondents or the specific industry in which the employer operates, were disregarded for both groups in the sampling process. This was due to the study's aim to gain a holistic understanding of the influencer marketing industry, rather than identifying implications for specific fields.

The reason for using two groups of respondents was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon in practice. In-house professionals provided the organisational view of how influencer marketing is perceived from the perspective of the organisation, and how risk is mitigated operationally. Consultants, through their mediating position, provided a holistic view of how the landscape of influencer marketing is being affected by organisations' perceptions and risk evaluations. Both perspectives speak to how the phenomenon of cancel culture is affecting influencer marketing professionals.

The reason for adapting a purposive sampling strategy was to gain rich units of data which can testify to the qualitative phenomenon being studied (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). For the purpose of this study, it was essential to gain access to respondents from the industry to account for how the phenomenon is perceived and approached in practice. Whilst adapting a non-probabilistic sampling does not substantiate generalizability of the study (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021), this is not the aim. As aligned with all qualitative research, the aim is to gain understanding of a phenomenon through those who are experiencing it (Bryman & Bell, 2017). For this study, that group was influencer marketing professionals.

Ultimately, 8 people with experience of influencer marketing participated in the study. They are introduced in Table 1:

Respondent nr	Description of position
Respondent 1	Founder of an influencer agency. Author, opinionator and lecturer within influencer marketing.
Respondent 2	Self-employed communication and PR consultant with experience of influencer marketing.
Respondent 3	CEO of an influencer marketing agency.
Respondent 4	Head of PR at an multi-brand outdoor and athleisure company, chairperson at an influencer marketing agency and opinionator within marketing.
Respondent 5	Masterdata and Campaign Manager at a distribution company for retail products within cleaning and beauty.
Respondent 6	Signings and Brand Ambassador Manager at an global e-commerce fashion retailer.
Respondent 7	Social Media Manager and Head of Ambassadors at an institution for higher education.

Respondent 8	Country Manager for an influencer network that connects influencers with companies and vice versa, based on first hand data.

Table 1: List of Respondents

4.2.3 Interview Preparation

In preparation for the interviews, questions corresponding to previous research and adhering to the purpose of the study were developed. In accordance with the abductive approach, questions were formulated to promote an open format as recommended by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021). This was determined as most efficient to facilitate answers to the research questions. Before conducting the semi-structured interviews, potential respondents who met the sampling criteria were contacted. The search for respondents took place online and through referrals. Online search was conducted through either the search function on the networking platform LinkedIn using keywords such as *influencer marketing manager* or *influencer marketing agency*, or through the websites of organisations known for working with influencer marketing. LinkedIn was primarily used as it accounts for the respondent's employment and thus relevance for this study. Referrals came from prospective respondents or private networks, where contact information was shared with the researchers.

The initial contact with the potential respondents was established through LinkedIn or email. A short, informal message, explaining the scope of the research and the researchers' interest in the person's professional experience was sent, asking the potential respondent to reply if they wished to learn more about the study and were interested in participating. The message can be found in Appendix 1a. After receiving a reply from a potential respondent which expressed interest in participating in the study, an additional message was sent out informing the person about practicality, such as anonymity and timeframe (see Appendix 1b). Moreover, potential respondents were allowed to suggest the time of the interview, as well as their preference for a physical or digital interview. This was to make the respondents feel comfortable and respect their schedule. The researchers were flexible and always accommodated the preferences expressed by the respondent. This ensured the respondents availability and fostered trust and positive relationships between interviewers and interviewees, which is essential for obtaining honest answers according to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021).

4.2.4 Interview Structure

Two interview guides divided into four main themes to be covered through the interviews. These were developed in accordance with the process suggested by Guest, Namey and Mitchell (2013), starting with a thorough examination of the research objective and what information would be required to answer the research questions and fulfil the purpose of the study. Following this was

the process of brainstorming, phrasing, and sequencing the potential question was conducted to ensure the quality and outcome of the guides (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013). The guides incorporated different types of questions, including introductory and follow-up questions to initiate discussion, probing questions to explore specific topics in depth, and interpretive questions to seek clarification from participants (Brennen, 2017).

The interview guides would direct the structure of the interviews and ensure that the consistency between different interviews would not be compromised. Two interview guides were prepared, one suitable for exploring the perspective of in-house professionals and the other suitable for consulting professionals. The decision to distinguish the interview guides depending on the respondents' professional experience was considered necessary to generate depth and ensure relevancy for the respondents. The relevancy of the questions for the respondents was evaluated from their role description, research about the organisation and literature about the influencer marketing industry (Gustavsson, 2022).

The interview guides were similar and followed the same main themes. See Appendix 2a and 2b. The first theme, *Introduction*, consisted of introductory questions to establish the basis for the interviews. These questions not only enabled researchers to familiarise themselves with the participants and create a suitable atmosphere for the interview (Brennen, 2017), but also facilitated an understanding of the respondent's role in the organisation.

The second theme, *Influencer Marketing*, aimed to create an overall understanding of the organisation's market communication strategy, the role of influencer marketing and respondents' general perceptions of influencer marketing. These questions attempted to account for the respondent's perception of opportunities and incentives for using influencer marketing. This section also aimed to understand the relationship between the influencers and the organisation to gain empirical insights to the associative link illustrated in the conceptual framework. The questions did not touch upon the associative link directly, as such questions could have been leading and caused answers to be less organic. This section is where the differences between the interview guides are made apparent, as questions about an organisation's market communication strategy and integration of communication tools were deemed irrelevant from a consultant's perspective. However, the perception of opportunities and incentives with influencer marketing were addressed in both interview guides.

The third theme, *Risk Evaluation,* consisted of questions aimed to explore the respondents' perception of risk with influencer marketing, relating to the first research question in this study. Questions were formulated to create an understanding of the general perception of risk which could later be put in the context of cancel culture to enable exploration of how the phenomenon has affected the respondents' perception of risk regarding influencer marketing. The questions also

aimed to investigate if the respondents perceived cancel culture as an emerging risk, without asking about it explicitly.

The last and fourth theme, *Cancel Culture*, aimed to create an understanding of the respondents' perception of cancel culture as a phenomenon as well as how it has affected the influencer marketing industry and the decision-making process from a managerial perspective. It also aimed to understand the sequence of events illustrated in the conceptual framework. Additionally, the fourth theme intended to answer the second research question and explore the strategies used for mitigating the risk of cancel culture adapted by respondents.

4.2.5 Interview Implementation

Ultimately, eight interviews were conducted with the sampled respondents. The interviews were conducted both in person and through the digital meeting platform Zoom between the 4th of April 2023 and 5th of May. The lengths of the interviews varied from 40 minutes to 65 minutes, roughly averaging 50 minutes.

Interviews were conducted both in person and the digital meeting platform Zoom, with the latter being more popular. The in-person interviews were conducted at various locations per the respondents' request, to accommodate their wishes and make them feel as comfortable as possible to express their true thoughts and experiences. One interview was held at a public space and one interview was held at the workplace of the respondent. The locations of the interviews at times compromised the audio quality of recordings but this concern was seen as subordinate to the convenience of the respondent.

The choice of the digital medium was primarily a matter of convenience and availability due to participants being located in various locations across Sweden. By saving time and costly resources, it enabled for even more participants to be included in the study. And as argued by Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019), the quality of the interview was equivalent to an in-person interview, as the visual component enabled interpretation of body language and expressions. The primary considerations when using Zoom rather than in-person interviews were the technical capabilities of the participants as well as potential technical difficulties. However, all participants were previously familiar with Zoom due to their digitised workplaces.

Prior to asking the interview questions, all participants were introduced to the purpose of the study. The participants were furthermore informed of their options to be anonymous and were also asked to give their consent to the interview being recorded. This was to ensure transparency towards the respondents and make them feel comfortable expressing their experiences and thoughts regarding cancel culture and influencer marketing, which can be a sensitive topic.

The semi-structured approach implemented through the interviews embraces a flexible and open-minded mindset (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). During the interviews, the semi-structured approach yielded less standardised responses from the participants, but instead provided more nuanced perspectives on their experiences. By utilising follow-up questions such as "how?" and "why?", as well as asking the respondents to elaborate on their answer, the semi-structured format provided a means to delve deeper and obtain more specific answers when necessary. Semi-structured interviews, as noted by Patel and Davidson (2019), typically exhibit a low degree of standardisation. In this case, the interview questions were not highly standardised, allowing for variations in the sequence of the questions presented while maintaining a consistent underlying structure in accordance with the interview guides. Depending on the respondents' responses, the interview was adjusted accordingly, and questions were arranged to suit the specific context. This approach granted the respondents freedom to share their experiences in a comprehensive manner.

To limit the risk of wrongful interpretations of the respondents' accounts, respondents were asked follow-up questions to ensure that the researchers correctly interpreted statements, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). These follow-up questions were asked in connection to the statement, with the researcher asking "am I correct in interpreting it as..." and then explaining their initial interpretation. The respondents then either confirmed or denied the interpretation or clarified the statement.

All interviews were recorded to be transcribed. This was also necessary to aid the researchers in accounting for and analysing respondent's answers (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The ability to revisit the data is also important to argue for the validity and reliability of the research, as it decreases the dependability on the researcher's memories (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Notes were also taken during the interviews to account for statements that were of particular interest during the interviews as well as account for non-verbal communication and for its relevant insights (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Transcription was also deemed necessary for presenting and structuring the data for the purpose of the study. The researchers used the transcription function in Microsoft Office's Word to assist in the transcription work, but also manually revised the transcription in accordance with the audio recording to make sure that there were no inaccuracies. Most of the interviews were conducted in Swedish, the native language of the researchers and respondents. This was due to the preferences of the respondents. The translation of the transcription presents possible implications for analysing the interviews and could potentially increase the risk of misinterpretation. To limit this risk, respondents were asked to confirm the translation of their quoted excerpts. The respondents' proficiency in English could potentially impact their ability to confirm the quotations, however, the respondents' proficiency level in English was deemed sufficient for the purposes.

4.3 Data Analysis

To allow the researchers to identify empirical findings through the frequently occurring, dominant or significant themes intrinsic to the data, thematic analysis was chosen as the appropriate data analysis method (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Thematic analysis is often utilised towards the purpose of identifying, analysing, and presenting patterns within qualitative research (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, it offers a comprehensive description of a vast data set and facilitates the concise summary and development of key findings from substantial amounts of data, as is typically obtained from interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The thematic analysis followed the steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis is initiated at the familiarisation of the data. During this step, it is vital to "immerse yourself in the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 16). As the chosen method for this study was interviews, this was furthermore the stage where all interviews were transcribed. In order to not lose track of any potential themes, notes reflecting initial thought and potential findings were taken by the researchers continuously throughout this stage.

The second stage consisted of identifying potential codes for the data analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that this coding process is driven by either data or theory. For this study, coding was an iterative process, and due to the abductive format of the study identified codes could be suggested from the data or theory alike. The coding was practically implemented through colour coding across the interview transcripts. In this stage, many potential codes were being explored and considered for inclusion in the thematic analysis. Ultimately, for the following step some codes were deemed as irrelevant to the scope of the study and did not sustain any theme. In this step, themes started emerging from the coding by combining the different categories of codes in documents. Some themes were seen as superior to others, subsequently causing some themes to become subthemes.

Next followed the review of the themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). The themes which were saturated in the data and responded to theory were kept, whilst those that lacked saturation or relevancy were rejected. Here, it was also important to critically reflect on the validity of the identified themes. The interview questions were now reviewed to ensure that the themes had not emerged from leading questions. As all themes were deemed as valid and accurate, they were kept for the next step: defining and naming. This was another iterative process that required further review of the themes. The central components here were to delimit and distinct themes from one another and capture their essence for the context. Most themes were initially given a working title, which was revised prior to finalising the paper for accuracy as well as creativity.

The last step of Braun and Clark's (2006) model is producing the report. Easier said than done, writing up a thematic analysis aimed at convincing the reader of the significance of the findings.

For this study, this was practically implemented through continuous argumentation in the researcher narrative as well as through the inclusion of especially rich excerpts of data from the transcripts. The excerpts that were selected to be presented as quotes testified to the claims by the researchers, and were selected by their ability to accurately yet illustratively depict the discourse revealing the saturated themes to the reader. Appendix 3 illustrates an example of how the coded themes were practically implemented.

4.4 Quality of Research

Validity and reliability are central variables when evaluating the quality of a study (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Both concepts are derived from the quantitative research tradition, and many qualitative researchers argue that an adaptation of the criteria is required to accurately evaluate the quality of qualitative research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019) bring forward trustworthiness and authenticity as more relevant variables of quality, which can be evaluated through a subset of criteria: *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *confirmability*.

4.4.1 Credibility

Credibility as a criterion shares the characteristics of *internal validity*: can researchers accurately make theoretical inferences from the data by their chosen method? In its essence, credibility is about whether you are investigating what you think you are investigating. Ensuring credibility as a qualitative researcher is often achieved through respondent validation (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). This is one of the strengths of adopting interviews as a method; there are often good opportunities to retrieve confirmation from the respondents to ensure that your interpretation is correct.

All quotes from the conducted interviews which were difficult to interpret were sent to the respondent who said it in transcribed form, to clarify or confirm what they meant by the quote. This was to ensure that the researchers limited the extent of misunderstanding which could cause the interpretation to not align with what the respondent meant. Prior to publication, all respondents were asked to give their consent to the inclusion of their featured quotes. This also presented an opportunity to correct any false interpretations made on the researcher's part.

4.4.2 Transferability

Transferability also relates to validity concerns but is more oriented towards the generalizability of the findings, or the so-called *external validity* (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). This is often a more prevalent issue than the abovementioned credibility criteria, as qualitative research as such is contextually bound to the instances being studied. However, as argued by Bell, Bryman and

Harley (2019), qualitative research can have a component of transferability, if the developed theory provides conceptualisations which hold applicational value beyond the isolated context.

Whilst a case study was originally considered to investigate the phenomenon of study, it was decided that this research would be bound to its context which would not align with the research question. There was an intent to gain multiple accounts of cancel culture to sustain richness in the description of the phenomenon. In practice, this was achieved through purposive sampling of influencer marketing professionals (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This richness was aimed at generating transferability of theory, as it enables findings to be conceptualised beyond a single organisational context.

4.4.3 Dependability

Unlike credibility and transferability, dependability relates to *reliability* rather than validity. In quantitative research, reliability refers to the study's ability to replicate the study and generate equivalent results. In qualitative research, this is an impossible standard to uphold as results are bound to their context (Easterby-Smith et al., 2017). Furthermore, holding a qualitative study to the ideal of replicability might compromise the theoretical depth of the research. Qualitative research should however not be exempt from attempting to generate unbiased results. Therefore, Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019) suggest that qualitative research should be evaluated according to the criteria of dependability. This criterion aims at decreasing the dependence on researchers by disclosing all procedures to the reader. Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019) suggest that the most effective strategy for ensuring dependability of a study is through being transparent and thorough when disclosing the research process and making this accessible to the readers. Therefore, the method section strives to provide the reader with a transparent disclosure of how the data was collected and processed. Additionally, several appendices are supplied to the reader and supplementary appendices are available upon request.

4.4.4 Confirmability

The last criteria, confirmability, relates to the ethos of the researchers (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Although arguably practically unachievable, a lack of personal bias should be the ideal to which the study is held (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). To limit personal bias, the study was not conducted in collaboration with any external parties and all sampled respondents were previously unacquainted to the researchers. To limit theoretical bias, the interviews were conducted according to proper research conduct; hence, not asking leading questions or ignoring unexpected inferences of the respondents. Furthermore, the ontological and epistemological presumptions are accounted for, to ensure transparency of potential theoretical bias. As argued in section 4.1.1, this study takes a social constructivist perspective and therefore presumes that the accounts of the respondents should be regarded as their subjective experiences, and not an objective reflection of truth. This was considered in the conduction of the interviews.

Alvesson (2003) argues that reflexivity is a critical aspect of conducting qualitative research and that researchers must consider their own potential bias through continuously evaluating and questioning the methodology. Results in qualitative research are inevitably affected by the researchers' own personal, social, and cultural background. These aspects affect how researchers ask questions and interpret the collected data. To obtain reflexivity, the researcher must thus actively consider alternative perspectives and interpretations of the studied phenomenon. Reflexivity was implemented throughout the study to identify and minimise potential sources of bias and thus strive for increased confirmability.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

One of the primary ethical principles concerning business research methods is informed consent (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). To follow the principle, researchers must supply respondents with sufficient information about the purpose of the research for the respondents to allow them in an informed decision regarding their participation. Prior to conducting all interviews, the respondents were given a brief introduction to the subject of the paper, informed of their option to be anonymous, asked for their consent to the interview being recorded and transcribed, and informed of their option to retroactively retract their participation in the study before publishing.

Deception is a common ethical pitfall among researchers (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019) define deception in the context of research ethics as "when researchers represent their research as something other than it is" (p. 123). This study was not exempt from deception, as an element of misrepresentation was arguably involved prior to conducting the interviews. The respondents were not informed that the object of study was the phenomenon of cancel culture; rather, when invited to participate in the study the object of study was loosely defined as "influencer marketing in a social media climate paved by constant scrutiny and judgmental audiences", see Appendix 1b for the entire invitation. The reason for not transparently disclosing the research purpose, was to gain organic response from the respondents when asked to identify risks. The researchers wanted to see if the respondents would identify cancel culture as a risk for influencer marketing without being explicitly asked about it. It was found to increase the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research.

Furthermore, cancel culture can be perceived as a controversial topic, which could potentially be discouraging for participants. Bell, Bryman & Harley (2019) points to harm to participants as one of the recurring issues within research ethics, including physical harm, stress, and harm to career prospects. Potential harm to participants was mitigated by the anonymisation of respondents, to ensure that none of the statements could be traced back to the person or organisation they represent. Some participants requested that the people and organisations that they referenced in their

interviews would be anonymised as well, a request met by the researchers. Privacy of the respondents (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019) was a highly regarded ethical principle which was processed throughout the data collection, analysis, and presentation.

5 Empirical Analysis

In this section, the empirical findings from the conducted interviews will be presented and conceptualised in the theoretical context. To explore how cancel culture is affecting professionals' perception of risk with influencer marketing, the current state of the industry must be accounted for. Therefore, the first section aims to provide an overview of why and how organisations included in this study adopt influencer marketing as a market communication strategy as well as perceived developments that have affected the industry. The second section will explore how cancel culture is perceived by professionals working with influencer marketing, and the perceived risks in relation to cancel culture. The third section explores which strategies the professionals adapted to mitigate the risk of cancel culture and is divided into proactive and reactive strategies.

5.1 Influencer Marketing as a Market Communication Strategy

The results from the data collection found that all the respondents, similar to Mangold and Faulds (2009), believed that social media and content driven marketing is important to focus on in today's market, with much consumer interaction taking place online. The attitude towards influencer marketing was generally positive among the inhouse professionals, with the respondents implementing influencer marketing in their market communication to varied extents. The organisations' different approaches to influencer marketing can be categorised accordingly with the influencer marketing strategies defined by Gustavsson (2022): influencer marketing as a silo, influencer marketing as part of the communication mix and influencer marketing as the core.

When asked about why they chose to focus on influencer marketing as a part of their market communication, four main incentives for influencer marketing were identified among the respondents' answers: high conversion rate due to high credibility, measurable results, favourable associations to influencers, and high value for money. According to previous research, influencer marketing drives sales and generates high conversion as a result of influencers' ability to directly affect consumers' purchase decisions, as their followers perceive them as trustworthy and reliable sources of information (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). All the respondents perceived the followers' trust and the credibility of influencers to entail lucrative potential. Respondent 1 illustrated the perspective of the follower stating: "I trust what [influencers name] says when she chooses clothes. That's why I also trust her when she says to buy this shampoo or this car insurance or whatever it might be like", which illustrates how the influencer's relationship with their followers influence purchasing decisions and generates high conversion rates (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

The measurability of influencer marketing activities was repeatedly mentioned as an incentive for the respondents implementing it in their market communication. As illustrated by the following quote, the ability to trace the economic outcome of influencer marketing efforts through statistics was perceived as a unique proposition of the strategy:

> Unlike a newspaper ad or TV commercial or radio ad, it [influencer marketing] has a different type of traceability […]. When you do influencer marketing, especially on Tiktok or Instagram, where we mostly work with influencer marketing, there you can get views, likes, comments and so on, but also information about how long people watched this clip and how many clicked through to the website.

<div align="right">Respondent 1</div>

Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget (2019) argue that well executed influencer marketing can strengthen the brand image. An incentive for influencer marketing put forward by several respondents was, much like argued by Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget (2019), the impact of being associated with a specific influencer can have on the brand image of the advertising brand. Respondent 3, representing an influencer agency, explained that their clients often use influencer marketing for the opportunity to be associated with the brand image of the influencer and gain a reflection of that onto their own brand. "The brands that want to be perceived as sustainable collaborate with [influencer name]. Her brand is worth a lot because she has great credibility in what she says. And the brand that buys her wants to be associated with this green life" explained Respondent 3.

The high value for money was also pointed out as an incentive for implementing influencer marketing in marketing communication. Some respondents found creative value in collaborating with influencers; Respondent 4 suggested that working with a creative influencer that has a significant reach can be a cost-efficient way to produce content and compared it to the costs of hiring a photographer, creator, and concept developer through a marketing agency. Influencers are rather both a producer and distributor of content, often making influencer marketing efficient in regard to both timely and financial resources. Additionally, Respondent 2 suggests that working with influencers is different from traditional advertising as influencers have more control over the message of the content they publish. As argued by Giertz et al. (2022), influencers are "message creators", rather than just distributors of advertisement. Respondent 2 reasoned similarly, explaining that even if the organisation provides material, influencers often repackage it in their own way, which can make the content feel more authentic to their audience. This authenticity was perceived as beneficial to the brand supposedly resulting in a greater return on investment.

5.1.1 Developments of the Industry and Determining Factors

Several of the respondents put forward that the above-mentioned benefits has caused influencer marketing to gain attention and recognition as a legitimate and effective market communication strategy. The data collection suggests that the industry has undergone significant developments in a short period of time; just a few years ago there was still widespread scepticism among professionals and organisations regarding the legitimacy of influencer marketing. All the respondents representing influencer marketing agencies pointed out that they have observed an increase in organisations taking an interest in influencer marketing on the Swedish market and that they believe that more organisations are including it in their promotion mix (Kotler, Armstrong & Parment, 2017) to some extent. Respondent 1, who had been working with influencer marketing since 2016, stated that "more people are including it in their promotion mix, or at least think about doing it today. Maybe they don't have an 'always on' arrangement, but maybe they work with some influencer here and there". Respondent 4, who also got involved with influencer marketing in 2016, pointed out that managers are now realising the importance of social media presence and influencer marketing.

Despite the general perception among respondents, that influencer marketing is gaining recognition and increasing importance for organisations, several respondents were under the impression that the industry is paved with ignorance and incompetence. Respondent 1 argued that: "there is still quite a lot of ignorance about what influencer marketing is and you think about make-up, fashion and interior design and today influencer marketing is so much more than that and you can use it". Respondent 8 also argued that the influencer industry still has to undergo some developments to establish itself more, and that frivolous, less professional stakeholders within the industry are affecting the general credibility. "It is still in its infancy", Respondent 8 stated about the current state of the industry.

When asked what developments they had taken notice of within influencer marketing, many of the respondents pointed out that the role of influencer has become more legitimised as a profession, which has led to influencers being able to make higher demands towards organisations and vice versa. Respondent 4 explained that even smaller influencers are now demanding monetary compensation for content, when just a few years ago, free products would suffice as incentive for the influencer posting social media content for an organisation:

> Now even people with 5000 followers have to have a budget, rightfully so because it's a job, but it was much simpler back then. So it has become like a profession, a real job and that acceptance has started to follow.

> Respondent 4

The legitimisation and emergence of the influencer profession was put forward as a reason for the growth of influencers with different niche audiences by several of the respondents. Respondent 4 expressed that the influencer profession has previously consisted of profiles within fashion and beauty with a lot of followers but is now expanding to include more niche profiles: "Now we see everything from home and gardening, to baking" they stated, consistent to the claims by Gustavsson (2022). Several other respondents elaborated on this, explaining that the emergence of niche influencers allows organisations within every industry to leverage the benefits of working with influencer marketing, as they can locate their consumers on social media.

A majority of respondents either directly or indirectly pointed out cancel culture as a social development that has affected the industry and how the organisations perceive risk with influencer marketing, without being asked about it specifically. Respondent 8 testified to the emergence of cancel culture along with inflation and general uncertainty as a reason to why some organisations choose to invest in other market communication than influencer marketing:

> I would also say that cancel culture. That has been a hot topic for a while now, and is something that: What does it entail and should you support it or should you…? Yes, how should you work with cancel culture when an influencer makes a fool of themselves? [...] But also, I would say that influencer marketing, now when we are heading towards a recession, maybe is something that you can easily remove from the promotion mix. It is maybe more like: 'nice to have, more than, need to have'.

> Respondent 8

Respondent 8 also explained that these factors could make stakeholders perceive the risk of implementing influencer marketing higher than traditional channels such as TV, radio or outdoor advertisement, that they have more experience with. The respondent also stated that they believe that the extent of risk with influencer marketing depends on how integrated it is in the marketing strategy. Other respondents pointed to cancel culture in implicit terms by referring to changes in consumers' attitudes and behaviour. Respondent 3 explained that they have observed consumers becoming increasingly critical towards influencers and monitoring their every move on social media in order to find indicators of misconduct or uncharacteristic behaviour for the specific influencer, especially within paid content. High expectations coupled with intense scrutiny are accounted for by Lewis and Christin (2022) as reasons to why influencers risk being cancelled.

However, none of the respondents included in this study claimed that these factors made them exclude influencer marketing from their market communication. Instead, they identified a need for more thorough considerations in their decision-making process adapted to the contemporary state of the industry, which will be further elaborated in the following sections. Developments such as the emergence of new platforms and algorithms were also disclosed throughout the interviews, however, these will not be elaborated on further in this analysis as they were deemed non-relevant to the scope of this study.

5.2 Perceptions of Cancel Culture

All respondents had previous knowledge of cancel culture when asked about their familiarity with the term. However, just as highlighted by several scholars (Clark, 2020; Lokhande & Natu, 2022) there was a prevalent lack of unanimous definition for the phenomenon.

> Influencers have a responsibility in that they reach out to a lot of people. They are, in a way, people in power. They can not enact laws, and they can not go out and arrest someone, it is not a forcible power. However, they do influence many as they reach with content and can affect. And that also means that they should be scrutinised and that is what cancel culture kind of is [...] A definition of cancel culture… a reaction to that we have new people in power, I would say, that need to be scrutinised.

> Respondent 1

By positioning influencers in the contemporary context where they presumably hold a lot of coercive power, Respondent 1 acknowledges the democratic function of cancel culture. Through drawing a parallel between the traditional perception of power, which is sustained by economic, cultural, and social capital, to a new contemporary perception of power, which is instead sustained by reach, the democratic function of cancel culture can be argued in the case of cancelled influencers (Clark, 2020). As argued by Tandoc et al. (2022), cancel culture can be seen as the general public expressing their distrust by withdrawing support. Several respondents echoed this and found that influencers due to their powerful position need to be scrutinised and held accountable when they have behaved poorly.

However, other respondents had a more managerial perspective on cancel culture and spoke to how it affected their work with influencer marketing. Although no one went as far as to explicitly claim that cancel culture has caused implications for the daily operations of their work, many pointed out that the media coverage of specific cases of cancel culture had started discussions at their organisation. Despite this, it became evident throughout the data collection that proactive measures were integrated in decision making processes in response to cancel culture, which will be elaborated further in the coming sections.

Respondents could identify direct effects of cancel culture for the targeted influencer, most of which related to termination of collaborations as an implication for a cancelled influencer. This was likely due to the perspectives of the respondents, as they themselves are working in collaboration with the influencers. When an influencer has been cancelled, their shared brand equity has been compromised (Abbasi et al., 2023) which decreases their value for organisations and can furthermore even inflict damage to the organisation's own brand, as mentioned by several of the respondents. Relating to this, damage to the brand of the influencer was also acknowledged but not discussed in depth. Credibility was by Respondents 2 and 3 seen as a vulnerable asset of

the brand which was susceptible to being affected by cancel culture. This directly affected the influencers' brand equity towards organisations as a stakeholder (Giertz et al., 2022). Only Respondent 7 mentioned loss of followers as an implication of a cancellation and argued that a lost follower for the influencer is a lost consumer for the company.

> People have very high expectations on influencers, from what they eat, what they do, what they work with and what they share. They have a lot of eyes on them. Just look at [influencer]. She can not breathe without people criticising her. In a way I agree, that it is their job to be public so they have to take feedback. But there is a difference between taking feedback and taking shit.

> Respondent 4

A common denominator between respondents' perceptions was that the emergence of cancel culture for influencers was enabled by their susceptibility to intensive scrutiny, as pointed out by Respondent 4 in the quote above. This was explained by the respondents as a scepticism towards the profession as such, as well the high level of self-disclosure and availability of the influencer. The extent to which cancel culture was perceived as unfair and harsh varied between the respondents and some sympathised with the influencer more than others.

According to the respondents, there are many different actors that partake in the emergence of cancel culture. Respondents 5 and 7 claimed that the discontent of the general public was the catalyst for cancel culture, through both active and passive boycotts (Tandoc et al., 2022). However, for the phenomenon to fully emerge, facilitators of cancel culture were also identified. Respondents 3, 4 and 8 all pointed to traditional media such as newspapers and tabloids as contributors and accelerating facilitators enabling the phenomenon to occur. This aligns with the findings of Lewis and Christin (2022), who found that influencers often experience that they are undermined by overtly critical coverage in traditional media. In the study, traditional media's interest in cancel culture was described as an attempt to compensate for lost authority and to capitalise on the contemporary media climate (Lewis & Christin, 2022). This was also argued by several respondents. Respondent 8 claimed that traditional media "fuel" cancel culture to "reach their goals with impressions and sell ads and so on". The respondent went on to explain that the interest in influencers with a large following is particularly high as that traditional media has identified an opportunity to capture new audiences, further accelerating the investigation for potential influencer scandals.

Respondent 6 explained that the large amount of media coverage and the online discourse among consumers that occurs in connection to an influencer scandal exerted pressure on the organisation to respond when an influencer they are associated with is cancelled. Whether or not the respondents intended to participate in cancel culture themselves varied. Most respondents claimed that in actual or hypothetical scenarios of an influencer being cancelled due to a scandal, they would terminate all collaborations either in silence or publicly to distance their brand from the influencer. However,

this was commonly followed by an emphasis on that each situation would entail its individual judgement. Some respondents, in particular those representing the agency perspective, advocated for the influencer in question and stated that they would actively not participate in cancel culture.

The respondents working in-house explained that they experienced that the media attention and visibility of influencer scandals caused them to be subject to pressure exerted by the general public. Their organisations have a more tangible association to the influencer due to both brands being directed at consumers, whilst agencies work business-to-business and not being as visibly interconnected to consumers (Gustavsson, 2022). A fear towards the organisation being cancelled by association was particularly evident in the interviews with inhouse professionals. Respondent 6 expressed their concern of being accused of wrongdoing by the media and consumer in a situation where they had collaborated with an influencer that later had turned out to be controversial and emphasised the importance of acting swiftly in such situations. Elaborating on this, Respondent 8 argued that other stakeholders to the influencer issuing responses through media or social platforms accelerates the pace and intensity of pressure on the organisation to also issue a response, stating that "one brand starts, then the others feel panic - now we have to join in".

Evidently, the result of the data collection showed that the perceptions of cancel culture as a risk with influencer marketing varied yet shared several characteristics. All respondents acknowledged that cancel culture is an emerging phenomenon and could identify direct effects for influencers and potentially themselves. This indicates that professionals are associating cancel culture as a risk with influencer marketing.

5.2.1 Identified Risks

All respondents could testify to potential risks of employing influencer marketing as an organisation. Several tangible risks were brought forward, such as low quality of the paid content, deceptive statistics, or regulatory issues regarding disclosure of commercial affiliation. These risks appear in the recommendations of Backaler (2018) of which risks to calculate prior to engaging in influencer marketing. However, as also acknowledged by Backaler (2018), there are also less tangible, long-term reputational risks involved with influencer marketing. A majority of respondents were quick to identify that cancel culture in particular constituted a risk for influencer marketing. Several respondents argued that if they were to be associated with an influencer that has been cancelled, the judgement of the organisation could be questioned, and they would likely suffer from criticism about how they recruit their influencers. Collaborating with an influencer who is cancelled may appear as uninformed, or even "reckless" as suggested by Respondent 7.

Furthermore, the associative link between the influencer and the organisation was repetitively brought forward by the respondents as a risk in the contemporary cancel culture. Although associations to an influencer was perceived as an incentive and favourable outcome for influencer

marketing, respondents much like several scholars identified risks with potential negative spill-over effect through the associative link between the influencer and advertising brand (Till & Shimp, 1998; Kintu & Ben-Slimane, 2020; Cornwell, Humphreys & Kwon, 2022). Several respondents stated that an organisation being associated with a profile that is caught up in a scandal could negatively affect its brand through the associative link. When asked about how susceptible the brands of the respondents' own organisations were to being affected by an influencer being cancelled, perceptions varied greatly.

> There is a partial risk in that they screw up. It is a given that that will spill over on the brand. Like with [brand] and [influencer], their collaboration in the US, where [influencer] expresses himself incorrectly. They broke it off with him with every right, because that can spill over on your brand. But I also think that we are a bit neurotic. I think people understand that 'okay, that is an individual and that is a brand, it is not one identity'.
>
> Respondent 4

The quote above illustrates the conflicting thoughts many respondents experienced about the risk of cancel culture for their own brand. Although many perceived the effects as marginal and claimed that consumers can differentiate between the influencer and the brand, some argued that there was indeed a risk associated with working with a cancelled influencer, as it could spill over on the brand of the organisation, as pointed out by Respondent 4. This concern aligns with the term *scandal spillover,* explored by Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020), suggesting that being associated with a scandal such as an influencer being cancelled has a spill-over effect on the associated brand. Respondents similarly identified a risk in being associated with an influencer that has been cancelled, often pointing to the associative link as an enabler for the risk of spill-over effect on the organisation.

During the interviews, it was prevalent that decision making factors regarding influencer marketing had been impacted by the emergence of cancel culture. The data collected suggests that central decisions in influencer marketing were impacted by the emergence of cancel culture, with several deliberations being seen as either positively or negatively affecting the risk of the organisation being affected by cancel culture. Four themes were identified, namely: the size of the influencer, the extent of the collaboration, the personal character of the influencer as well as the human factor embedded in working with people.

5.2.1.1 Size Matters

Gustavsson (2022) categorises influencers into different groups based on the size of their account determined by the amount of followers, varying from the smallest nano influencers, with a following of up to ten thousand followers, to the largest mega influencers, with over one million followers. Deciding which type of influencer is most effective to work with was shown to be an

intricate decision and an issue that all of the respondents elaborated on when asked about what criteria they focus on when selecting which influencer to employ. The respondents found different implications for using influencers with a small or large following respectively, and several of them explained that which type of influencer to select depends on the objective that the organisation has with influencer marketing.

The results of the data collection suggest that there are many incentives for different types of influencers. However, most of the respondents included in this study advocated using nano or micro influencers as opposed to macro or mega influencers. Respondent 2 accounted for a preference of working with micro-influencers as they offer a more niche audience and are often more quality oriented. They believe that working with larger influencers may not be feasible for many organisations due to the high cost and the audience not being as aligned with the organisation's target group stating "I personally believe a lot in micro influencers because you can't like... There are very few people who can afford to buy [name of mega influencer], or anyone else of that size". Micro-influencers were instead perceived to offer a more targeted and engaged audience, despite their smaller following.

Despite many of the respondents advocating and preferring niche influencers over those with a large following, some pointed out that there are situations where bigger influencers are preferable. Respondent 5 explained that the choice of influencer depends on the objectives, exemplifying that smaller influencers could be effective for acquiring new consumers, whilst larger influencers could generate traffic to the organisation's website. This reasoning aligns with the first step in the decision-making framework suggested by Lin, Bruning and Swaenda (2018), suggesting that an organisation should start by stating their objective of the influencer marketing campaign and select an influencer accordingly.

When asked what criteria could affect an influencer's likelihood to be cancelled, many respondents were quick to identify size of the influencer as a determining factor. However, it was seemingly debatable whether micro or mega influencers constituted the biggest risk. Respondent 1 claimed that micro influencers are more likely to be caught up in scandals, as they are not as professionalised as the mega influencers. Whilst mega influencers are often well versed in both the regulatory guidelines of influencer marketing and traditional media logic, micro influencers did not share this awareness, argued Respondent 1. They furthermore stated that mega influencers are often more controlled by their stakeholders, such as their agencies, making them less likely to "screw up".

> I believe that the bigger you are and the stronger your brand as an influencer is, the bigger is the risk of [being cancelled] if you compare to a smaller influencer. I do not think that the media is as interested in you [...] the bigger and stronger you are as a media channel, the bigger is the risk that you are on the radar.
>
> Respondent 8

The above quote illustrated the difference in opinions amongst the respondents. Just as Respondent 8, many did not share the perspective of Respondent 1, and instead argued that mega influencers are more likely to be cancelled. These respondents claimed that micro influencers are not susceptible to the same extent of scrutiny by media, and are not as exposed to the public eye, causing potential transgressions or misconduct to go unnoticed.

Although no respondent claimed that their decision of influencer was dependent on their size's adjacent likelihood of being cancelled, it was evident that respondents could identify and weigh these risks in their decision-making processes which indicates that cancel culture has had an affect on how these professionals perceive risk of employing different influencers according to size of their audiences.

5.2.1.2 High Risk, High Reward

Um and Kim (2016) note that the connection between a celebrity and a brand's strength is subject to various factors such as the message exposure, brand or product involvement, the likeability of the celebrity endorser, duration of the endorsement, and several other elements. Similarly, the strength of the associative link between an influencer and the brand of an organisation depends on similar factors as those of a celebrity (Giertz et al., 2022). The strength of the link thus varies greatly between an influencer who has only posted a single sponsored post, to an influencer who has been a brand ambassador for several years (Um & Kim, 2016). All the respondents pointed to the benefits of doing long term influencer marketing collaborations and often deemed short term collaborations to be unnecessary or "a waste of money" if the objective was to leverage the influencer's brand. Both Respondents 1 and 4 claimed that they always recommend purchasing a higher quantity of influencer marketing content over a longer period of time, to strengthen the associations to the influencer.

Despite a generally favourable notion towards long term collaborations among respondents, short term collaborations were pointed out as a great way to acquire short term measures. All respondents spoke to how organisations often request long term collaborations with a higher volume and frequency of content for their brand. This was partly described as a matter of cost efficiency as organisations were often given a quantity discount, but also as a wish to have a more involved relationship with the influencer and to establish a more tangible association between the influencer and the organisation.

> You want to associate with people that have high credibility for the target group. But also because you get more content, more contact to the end consumer. And then you have repeated that this influencer stands for this or works with this company, which contributes with value for the buyer.
>
> Respondent 1

As claimed by Respondent 1, it is the credibility of the influencer that the organisation wants to associate with to increase their own credibility. One of the respondents who was directly involved with the valuation of influencer collaborations explained that credibility is often translated to a numerical value in negotiations, and that organisations are willing to pay a higher cost to be associated with influencers with high credibility. This provides practical insights to how shared brand equity, as defined by Cornwell, Humpreys and Kwon (2022), is practically applied to influencers. The wish to associate with the credibility of the influencer was, for many organisations, the main incentive for the collaboration, with quantitative results such as reach losing priority. The demand for credibility also seemingly increased the price for influencers that were perceived as credible. Thus, credibility can be seen as a central characteristic for determining an influencers' shared brand equity.

Several respondents pointed out the importance of considering risk when adopting long-term collaborations with influencers. The respondents pointed out that an especially high level of association to a specific influencer could potentially constitute a risk for the organisation. A high risk was identified for organisations who have constructed their brand based on a specific influencer, or organisations that employ influencers as ambassadors who are frequently recurring in the organisation's market communication activities. These organisations were seen as being prone to experience spill-over effects from the influencer being cancelled. As Respondent 2 put it: "When they *are* the brand, that is the highest risk". Much of the respondents' perceptions about brand associations correlate with theory about brand associations, such as Kittel and Stango (2014), who found that a higher level of association to a public figure will have an increased impact on associated brands. Respondent 8 similarly stated that "the stronger you have an association to a specific person, influencer or celebrity, the higher the risk". Additionally, the repetition of collaborations with an influencer, which according to the respondents is becoming increasingly popular through long-term collaborations, was also perceived to strengthen the level of the associative link between the influencer and the organisation as argued by Till & Shimp (1998).

Keller (2020) points to the importance of predetermining the extent of association the organisation wants to communicate through a long-term or short-term collaboration with influencers. Despite cancel culture constituting a risk for long-term collaborations according to the respondents, all of them stated that they still perceive the reward superior to the risk, thus deciding to do it anyways. Respondent 8 endorsed the use of long-term collaborations, claiming that "Ambassadors are very positive for the brand if you have a good ambassadorship. If it is a good person, who does it very well, then your brand can get an extra push from it, so that is a risk you take".

Respondents 2 and 5 argued that the risk of being associated with an influencer could be mitigated by "spreading the risk", through sustaining a higher quantity of weaker associations rather than focusing on maintaining fewer with strong associations. For influencer collaborations which were

short-term or "sporadic", the risk of being affected by a cancellation was perceived as smaller. Using many influencers was also seen as weakening the associations to the respective influencers. Respondent 2 drew the parallel to the investment philosophy of "diversifying your assets", to mitigate potential negative effects from one of your investments.

5.2.1.3 Personality as a Liability

The respondents often pointed to the fact that influencers are human, and that risk can never truly be eradicated when working with humans. As the risk of cancel culture relates to the behaviour of individuals (Norris, 2021; Saint-Louis, 2021; Velasco, 2021), it is beyond the control of organisation management. However, in the interviews with respondents, several pointed out that some influencers are more likely to be cancelled than others, on the accounts of their "unconventional" or "free spoken" personality. Yet, these influencers held unique propositions according to Respondent 2, who suggested that the employment of such influencers was a promotion strategy, as these influencers often have a high visibility, and an attractive tonality. Due to their often startling content, they tend to gain attention on social media and attain a reach extending to traditional media. It also differentiates them from other influencers, Respondent 2 argues, making them an attractive counterpart for organisations and followers alike. Both high reach and attractive attributes of an influencer respond to the unique value proposition of influencer marketing, as argued by Keller (2020). Working with influencers with a strong personality could result in a high reach, increasing the brand awareness for the associated brand of the organisation, as well as establishing an association to the seemingly attractive attributes of the influencer (Keller, 2020). This underscores that influencers with a strong personality constitutes a high value for organisations.

The personality of the influencers was seemingly considered in the decision-making process by respondents, evaluated as both an opportunity and a liability. Several respondents pointed out that an influencer that is successful in engaging their followers' balances being relatable yet aspirational. The follower can identify with the influencer, although they represent traits that the follower desires for themselves (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). Respondent 7 described the identification as: "It is like seeing your "ideal-self" in front of you and knowing that you can achieve that "ideal-self". It becomes a success story". Respondent 6 elaborated on this, claiming that the balancing act is delicate and being either too relatable or too aspirational can reduce follower engagement. Influencers who are too relatable might not create incentives to the followers to emulate them: "The girl next door is not gonna make you buy something" as Respondent 6 put it. Influencers who are too aspirational could instead be perceived as unattainable, causing followers to give up on attempting to emulate them. This take echoes the findings of Hoffner and Buchanan (2005), who found that identification derives from actual similarity as well as the desire to be like the aspirational person, wishful identification.

> Some are a facade. You know nothing personal about them. [influencer], I would say that there is no personality in her profile or creatorship. And I think a person like [another influencer] who is more personal, talks about her opinions and things that are happening in the world, of course are more likely to be cancelled. But also easier to worship and gain an established great community because you are more private and personal and share opinions. It is for better or for worse.

<div align="right">Respondent 5</div>

It was prevalent and often exemplified in the interviews, such as in the quote by Respondent 5, that influencers who are more relatable through self-disclosure and interaction were associated with a higher risk than those who merely presented aspirational value. A liability was identified with the personality of relatable influencers, whilst working with an influencer that is aspirational served similarities to celebrity endorsements. As suggested by Giertz et al. (2022), influencers are often employed as "message creators", whilst celebrities are merely "messengers". Whilst the latter was also seen as an effective and more risk-averse strategy, respondents largely echoed the findings of Wei et al. (2017), by arguing that these influencers do not have the same relationship with, or persuasive power over, their audience.

5.2.1.4 The Human Factor

The respondents often pointed to the fact that influencers are human, and that risk can never truly be eradicated when working with humans. Although some strategies were suggested to mitigate risk to a certain extent, working with influencer marketing was described as inappropriate for organisations that wish to avoid the risk of cancel culture. Respondent 3 stated the following:

> If you are worried, then you should not work with people. Then you should work statically with outdoor commercials, that you have produced yourself, that are going on buses. But then you can not work with athletes either. They also screw up. There are scandals all the time. How many actors have we not seen sitting and snorting cocaine somewhere? You can not do that either. That is the thing with people, things happen.

<div align="right">Respondent 3</div>

As illustrated by the quote above, the perceived risk of cancel culture was not isolated to influencers but was also present for celebrity endorsements. Although the distinction between influencers and celebrities is blurry (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017), some respondents pointed out that influencers' presence and availability on digital platforms accelerates the effects of cancel culture, with the comment section on social media platforms being identified as a facilitator. Respondents seemingly shared the perspective of Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020), that the speed of dissemination of information as well as farsightedness on social media made it increasingly difficult for managers to act in times of crisis. Although scandals are not new, the public discourse about them on social media is impossible to control and requires new types of management (Kintu & Ben-Slimane, 2020).

Several respondents pointed out that traditional marketing channels allowed for more control from the organisation, whilst in influencer marketing this control is less conclusive as the influencer produces and distributes the marketing content themselves. Respondent 1 stated the following when asked what risk they could identify with influencer marketing:

> You hand over a very large part of the brand to the influencer and practically say that you can do whatever you want with this. So you sort of say that 'this is the brand and this is our product, you should market it in a way that suits your followers', and then it may not always be suitable to use the right colour or the right font as per the brand guidelines or the brand book that companies have. It doesn't always work in influencer contexts, so you have to be aware of that. Then you can control that in, for example, a brief, saying that you must not say these words or you must not mention our competitors and so on. But it is clear that there is a risk in letting go of control.
>
> Respondent 1

As suggested by the quote above, the human factor was also acknowledged in relation to practical matters. Some respondents stated that they approved paid content before or in connection with it being posted as a measure to ensure its quality and alignment with the brief. "Does it look right, is it placed right, is it the right music? All of those things. Because they [influencers] are still people, things can happen along the way", Respondent 3 stated when explaining the process of how they minimise the risk of discontent from the advertisers. Some respondents expressed a concern about losing control as influencers post their own content beyond the paid content produced for organisations, which cannot be controlled to the same extent. It was primarily for this content that the risk of cancel culture was identified by several respondents. Respondent 4 stated that "you can not control what an influencer does" and pointed to the content posted outside of collaborations. Many of the respondents referred to instances of influencers posting content depicting inappropriate content or expressing opinions which violates the general perception of morale, explaining that such content could through spill-over effect reflect poorly on the organisations that employ the influencer for influencer marketing. Respondent 7 suggested that this could consequently cause the organisation to become cancelled themselves:

> Yes, it is obvious that there are risks if [one of our ambassadors] would post content people consider should be cancelled. Or that a person should be cancelled because of what they post. And maybe through that the entire [brand of the organisation] because they "support it".
>
> Respondent 7

The data collected through the interviews highlighted that the risk of the human factor in connection with cancel culture goes beyond social media platforms and posted content. Many of the respondents explained that traditional media's constant monitoring of influencers' personal lives has caused concerns about the influencers' behaviour outside of social media, such as the company they keep, which opinions they express in private conversations and how they behave at

public social events. Respondent 3 stated that "there is always risk when you are working with people. A campaign can fail completely because the profile [influencer] is out on the town and starts fighting on [public place] and ends up on the front page of [newspaper]".

Respondent 4 elaborated on the risk of the human factor, stating that the personal relationship the influencer has with other influencers was a risk in itself as the influencer could find themselves in the "wrong company", which would be a risk for the organisations working with the influencer as well. Respondent 6 contrary pointed to the close community amongst influencers as a positive aspect of the industry which invites for more potential collaborations through the network. However, they also explained the risk of a domino effect if one influencer got caught up in a scandal, as other influencers associated with that person would be pressured to take a stance and potentially also be cancelled. These statements indicate that the respondents perceived the associative network to go beyond the association between the influencer and the organisation and to entail the respective associations of the two parties. This reasoning aligns with the association network theory as formulated by Till and Shimp (1998), where each of the parties in a collaboration represent their own association set, which go beyond the linear relationship between an individual and an organisation but encompasses several other entities which are also subsequently linked. The brand of other influencers can thus also be affected by an influencer on the account of their association, and a cancellation can potentially be harmful for people in an influencer's social network.

5.3 Strategies to Mitigate the Risk of Cancel Culture

The data collected through the interviews showed that risk evaluation was seemingly an integrated, but not prioritised, part of influencer marketing. All respondents were affirmative when asked if risk is associated with influencer marketing, and most respondents made the direct connection to the cancel culture. The strategies adopted to mitigate risk were often in response to the emergence of cancel culture.

5.3.1 Proactive Strategies

All respondents who worked with paid influencer marketing adopted some type of proactive strategy to mitigate risk in relation to influencer marketing. The respondents who worked with influencer marketing as a public relations practice, through unpaid activities such as press releases and free samples, did not account for taking any proactive measures. The organisations where these respondents were employed used influencer marketing either as a silo or as a part of their communication mix (Gustavsson, 2022), making it an equal counterpart to other promotional activities or communication channels. Respondents 2 and 4 both explained that an associated influencer being cancelled would fall under their general crisis communication guidelines, thus not

holding it to a different standard than any other type of communication channel. Furthermore, for this type of informal and undemanding type of relationship, the perception of risk was considered marginal to non-existent. This was due to a presumed low level of association between the influencer and the organisation, as well as a lack of formal commitment.

Proactive strategies were more prevalent among the organisations that use influencer marketing as their core strategy (Gustavsson, 2022), accounted for by Respondent 6 and 7. These organisations furthermore identified being associated with a cancelled influencer as a prevalent risk which could have direct short and long effects for their operation to a wider extent than those who worked with influencer marketing as a part of their communication mix. Therefore, measures were taken by the organisation to mitigate the risk prior to committing to an influencer for influencer marketing purposes.

5.3.1.1 The Matching Process

The process of matching the organisation with the right influencer before engaging in influencer marketing has been referred to as one of the most important aspects of the process by scholars (Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2019), which was confirmed by the respondent through the results of the interviews. Several of the respondents stated that matching the organisation with an inappropriate influencer could make the influencer marketing ineffective and result in a loss of revenue. In even worse cases, performing an influencer marketing activity that does not correlate with the brand image of the endorsed product was seen as potentially harmful to the brand of the organisation, the influencer or both. The choices of which influencer to work with should furthermore align with the brand of the influencer and fit with the values, position, and message the organisation wants to communicate to their consumer to sustain their brand image (Lee, Chang & Zhang, 2022). Because of this, the participants in this study admitted to spending a timely and financial resources on ensuring that the influencers they work with or represent do not conflict with the image of the organisation they are advertising.

In addition to this objective, respondents also found a thorough matching process to mitigate the risk of cancel culture. Respondent 4 stated that they prioritise meeting with the influencer to ensure that there is a good bond between the two parties and that they share the same values and interests prior to pairing up. They believe that building a strong relationship is crucial and would reject an influencer they do not consider as the right fit for their brand. Similarly, Respondent 3 did not shy away from rejecting influencers whose values and beliefs were questionable: "if the chemistry is not right, they will not be able to sell".

By ensuring congruence between the values of the influencer and the organisation, both success of the collaboration and a mitigation of risk could be achieved. One of the central takeaways from respondents was to not decide which influencer to select based on their statistics alone, as this was

not only volatile but could consequently lead to ignorance which could result in damage to the brand image of the organisation (Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2019). The respondents emphasised the importance of making an informed decision based on both "gut-feeling" and research.

5.3.1.2 Track Record and Background Check

In the interviews, it was prevalent that researching the influencer was central when mitigating the risk of cancel culture. As argued in the previous section, this research partly aims at ensuring that the influencer is a match for the organisation. It can however also be a way of scanning for potential liabilities with the influencer, which could increase the risk of cancel culture. All respondents argued that the previous behaviour of the influencer could provide indication to their future behaviour, and thus emphasised the importance of having thorough knowledge of the influencer's previous endeavours. Brand safety was mentioned by Respondents 3 and 8 as a metric, but whether it was calculated through an algorithm, as argued by Bishop (2021) did not prevail. In the interviews, it instead became evident that the respondents carried out this research in different ways, adapting different strategies. The first strategy was getting a picture of the influencers previous track record.

> We do look at their previous work, or what they are known from or how they grew their audience. Why are you famous? Is it because they had a relationship like five years ago and then they were very relevant and now they are not anymore? So yeah, it's very important to Google the person and do some background checks.
>
> Respondent 6

In the above quote, Respondent 6 explained that it is important to understand how the influencer built their fame and said that they often resorted to Google to get an impression of the influencer and their image. This was seen as providing an indication of the influencers' congruence with the brand but also the foundation of their following. Respondent 3 instead looked at the social media profiles instead and elaborated that it was not only scandals which were scanned for, but also eventual discrepancies between the influencer's identity and image. The respondent exemplified that an influencer that identifies themselves as a mom-influencer but has a large male following who primarily engages in content which sexualises the influencer might constitute a lack of congruence between the identity and image of the influencer. As argued by Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget (2019), an influencer's identity and image must resonate with the audience and message of the organisation using the influencer in their market communication, and not conducting thorough research could consequently result in discrepancies. Respondent 3 identified this as a prerequisite for an unsuccessful collaboration, regardless of the influencers reach. Respondent 7 similarly expressed that commercial interests should not overshadow the cultural fit.

Although many respondents had strategies for keeping the track record of the influencer, some wanted to verify their influencers through conducting a background check. Several respondents described that they performed this background check themselves through direct interaction with the influencer and described the interpersonal communication as the most important indicator for any liabilities. This reasoning aligns with the claims of Backaler (2018), that direct interaction with an influencer is essential for not only ensuring the fit with the brand, but also to limit the risk of them damaging the brand. Backaler (2018) continues to state that other perspectives are also required in this process and identifies industry colleagues as a potentially valuable source. Several respondents shared this proposition and claimed that they perform the background check through consultation with others.

> I have a few industry colleagues that I always double check with that are in Stockholm, where I ask: is it reasonable to pay this much for this profile? What is this person's reputation? [...] I check behind the scenes a lot for bigger collaborations to say 'okay, it looks good in their private life as well'. You can not always know, there is a lot of talk and so forth too. It is important to collaborate with the right person that is on brand.

<div align="right">Respondent 4</div>

In the above quote, Respondent 4 explained that they contacted industry colleagues with known previous experience of working with the influencer to ensure that they are a good investment and fit for the company, but also to scan for any liability which could increase the risk of a cancellation in the future. Respondent 7 also performed a background check on potential influencers by consulting with employees. Here, the purpose was rather to identify which influencer would generate engagement rather than identify any liabilities.

Exactly which liability factors were looked for when researching the track record and conducting a background check were not defined further by any respondents, but often referred to as insurance of the influencer's personal and professional values. However, two respondents exemplified that participation in reality television immediately disqualified an influencer from being considered. For these respondents, reality television held associations to "nudity" which was furthermore associated with scandals and hence deemed as inappropriate for the organisation to associate with. These findings align with those of Bishop (2021), that brands fear being associated with sexual content. Additionally, Respondents 1, 4 and 7 both identified expression of political affiliation as increasing the risk of cancel culture for influencers and associated organisations. Much like claimed by Norris (2023), people that are politically conservative were perceived as more likely to be cancelled.

Legal precautions are a common practice adopted by organisations to mitigate the risks associated with influencer marketing (Gustavsson, 2022). The empirical findings suggested that legal precautions were perceived to mitigate the risk of cancel culture, as they exerted some extent of control over the behaviour of the influencer by establishing restrictions. Respondents explained that moral clauses were recurring in influencer marketing contracts, and that these often aimed at establishing that the collaboration between the influencer and organisation would be made illegible if one of the parties were to exhibit inappropriate behaviour. Many respondents discussed how explicit the clause should be, and many argued that using more vague language with a few established limitations was most appropriate. Respondent 3 explained that influencers are entitled to their own opinions, beliefs and thoughts but are not allowed to express themselves "racist and such". Having specific requirements beyond these limitations was seen as intrusive. Respondent 7 further elaborated on this by stating that controlling the content that is posted counteracts the feeling of "freedom and the support to tell the stories you want to".

Whether legal precautions are an effective strategy to proactively mitigate risk was discussed by respondents.

> Let us say that, that you make the influencer liable for damages and such. Oftentimes it does not matter, because if the damage is too big it does not matter because an influencer can not cover the liability for the damage that has occurred. So it is, I do not know, more about trying to keep the influencer on the fence rather than ensuring that a financial damage does not occur.
>
> Respondent 2

Many respondents echoed Respondent 2 that legal precautions are not necessarily intended to be enacted to make the influencer liable for damages, but rather to keep the parties on track and to ensure a quick termination of the contract if needed. Actually enacting the clauses established in contracts was avoided and was perceived as a risk in itself. Respondent 5 provided an example of how when an influencer failed to uphold their obligations stated in the contract, the parties compromised and rather than enacting any clauses the influencer posted complementary content without additional cost. The reason for this was to maintain the relationship with the influencer. Respondent 6 elaborated on this, stating that "you choose your relationship above anything else". They also explained that another incentive for not taking legal action towards an influencer was to maintain a good reputation as a collaborative partner towards their other current and prospective influencers, an important stakeholder group. This indicates that the establishment of legal contracts in influencer marketing is a default practice which is largely symbolic, and not intended to make the influencer or any other stakeholder legally liable. Whilst ensuring the possibility to quickly terminate any legal obligation towards parties provided a sense of security, the lack of precedents

in the industry testified by the respondents demonstrated the general industry practice of not enacting the legal rights.

5.3.1.4 Relationship Building

Many respondents pointed out that strong relationships to influencers are essential to succeed in influencer marketing.

> Really good relationships, that's key to good partnerships. Honesty, transparency, making them feel that they get what they want. Because at the end, 'they are the queens' kind of thing. At least that is how you should treat them to get the most out of it.
>
> Respondent 6

Respondent 6 emphasised that it is important to appease the influencer to maintain a long-term relationship with them. They explained that this was often prioritised above upholding the predetermined brief of the collaboration or enacting legal action even where it would be viable. The respondent provided an example where an influencer did not deliver content on time and thus breached the contract, where the organisation had the option of holding them legally accountable but chose not to. The reasoning behind this was to not cause strain on the relationship with the influencer. Both Respondent 2 and Respondent 5 claimed that a strong relationship with the influencer will increase both the frequency and quality of content in unpaid promotion activities. Several respondents also found that by establishing and furthermore maintaining a good relationship with your influencer, the risk of cancel culture was mitigated. Respondent 2 claimed that a strong relationship between an influencer and an organisation could regulate the behaviour of the influencer, as they would naturally reflect more on how the organisation could be affected by their actions.

Respondent 6 went on to explain that the relationship between the influencer and the organisation is an intricate network. Representing an in-house perspective, they exemplified that the relationship between the organisation and the agency is also dependent on the relationship between the influencer and the organisation. The respondents representing an agency perspective furthermore acknowledged this aspect and explained that part of their job is managing the relationship between the influencer and the organisation. Respondent 3 stated that they often reached out to influencers directly if they identified potential risks in the content posted by an influencer, and that they expected the influencer to do the same if they could identify risks in their collaboration with an organisation.

Both Respondent 1 and Respondent 7 highlighted that the relationship between influencers can also function as a mitigation of risk. Both the respondents had established group chats with the influencers were instances of cancel culture, or other incidents to beware in their roles. In the chats,

influencers could discuss possible implications of occurred incidents or provide each other with support in uncertain situations.

Strengthening relationships across the entire network of the influencer marketing process was identified as mitigation of risk by respective respondents. As depicted by Gustavsson (2022), the industry is a network of relationships and interaction between stakeholders. Several of the respondents believed that the process of the industry could naturally mitigate the risk of cancel culture as decisions were passed through many stakeholders and responsibility is divided between the involved parties. However, the data collected in interviews also suggested that this could increase the complexity of an organisation engaging in influencer marketing, as damage to the relationship between the influencer and the organisation could negatively impact the other relationships involved.

5.3.2 Reactive Strategies

Although respondents could identify proactive measures to mitigate the risk of cancel culture, they explained that an incident where an influencer has already been targeted by cancel culture, required a situational analysis. Much like the reasoning of Louie and Obermiller (2002) and Zhou and Whitla (2013), it was the extent to which the influencer was blameless or blameworthy, as well as the degree of their moral breach, which determined what response was more appropriate for an associated brand. Respondents often exemplified with incidents of cancel culture, where severe instances often involved criminal offences and less severe instances involved poor judgement by the influencer.

Respondents did not have priorly established guidelines to handle the situation of a cancelled influencer, although some argued that the general guidelines for crisis communication could be applied. However, depending on the severity of the situation, respondents agreed that collaborations with a cancelled influencer should be terminated, or at least thoroughly reconsidered. Respondent 3 drew a parallel between a cancellation and a breach of contract:

> That is the way it works if you enter a contract. You can lose your rental lease, if you misbehave and continue to play loud music even though you have been asked not to, you will lose it eventually. Just as with everything, when you misbehave you can lose it. So it is nothing unique for a profile, or an influencer.

Respondent 3

Collaborations are mutually conditional, and despite proactive measures, a breach of conditions can occur. The respondents agreed that influencers that have misbehaved, even if it is not in relation to the organisation itself, that it is a violation of expectations. The perceived appropriate response

to this was nearly always to terminate the collaboration. But whether this response should be disclosed publicly was a topic of discussion. As highlighted by Tandoc et al. (2022), cancelling can either be performed privately or displayed publicly. The authors use the terms active and passive boycotts, to describe consumers that simply withdraw their support and consumers that actively participate in the discourse as well as encourage others to also boycott respectively. The empirical findings of this study similarly suggest that organisations identified and implemented either a silent or public response.

5.3.2.1 Silent Response

Respondent 6 had experience of cancel culture in practice, as one of the influencers they had previously worked with had been cancelled. The respondent described that the event was unprecedented to the organisation and that a decision had to be made on the spot. First, the organisation assured themselves that they had no ongoing collaboration with the influencer and then deleted all content made with the influencer from their own platforms. This was done "behind the scenes" as the respondent expressed it. The reasoning for this was that they did not want to draw more attention to the collaboration with the influencer and the incident as well as to remain "neutral" in the discourse. Although most respondents did not have direct experience of this, many reasoned similarly. This type of reactive response to cancel culture aligns with the mimetic disassociation strategy defined by Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020). As argued by the authors, this type of strategy is often not carefully deliberated, but is rather responsive to the public discourse without engaging in it.

None of the respondents had experienced strong pressure from the public due to cancel culture, and therefore found mimetic dissociation was appropriate. Respondents often perceived their own organisation's associations to influencers as relatively weak and argued that publicly distancing from the influencer could instead call for attention to an association which could otherwise have gone unnoticed. Many of the respondents argued that public distancing could be suitable for organisations which have especially strong associations with an influencer through ambassadorship and such. However, this was also perceived as problematic, and potentially harmful to the brand.

> It is up to each brand what they want to do, but I think that it can hurt rather than help your credibility to cancel right away [...]. To not just cut the ties, because that says that this is a brand that is not a brand you can trust.
>
> Respondent 4

It is important to not neglect that influencers are also a stakeholder group, and how an organisation handles the cancellation of an influencer also communicates to other current and prospective influencers who collaborate with the organisation. Rejecting an influencer publicly could possibly

also cause a strain on other relationships than the one between the influencer and the organisation, which was another incentive respondents gave for the silent response. Respondent 6 added that publicly agreeing to the cancellation of an influencer could partly compromise the relationship with consumers that do not agree with the cancellation, but also the relationship with other actors within the network of influencer marketing. The relationship between an organisation and an influencer agency was exemplified, as this was found to be harmed by the organisation speaking poorly of an influencer that is represented by the agency, as this affects the influencer's value and thus the profitable margin for the influencer agency.

Respondents with experience of direct relationships with influencers considered the silent response to advocate for the cancelled influencers and a refusal to participate, and hence reinforcing, cancel culture. Here, it was seen as unethical to "throw them under the bus". Yet, there was a concern among some respondents that the silence would appear as the organisation accepting the influencer's behaviour. This risk was also acknowledged by Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020), who furthermore found empirical evidence that this risk was real, and that organisations have suffered from the influencer's cancellation due to this.

5.3.2.2 Public Response

Although often favouring the silent response, many respondents reached the conclusion that some situations could call for a public response. The appropriate approach was determined by the situation. Respondent 1 referred to a public response as a "necessary evil" for companies that are closely connected to an influencer that has been cancelled. Many exemplified situations where they believe that an organisation was right to make a public response distancing themselves from the influencer; these were often situations where there was high pressure from the public to act and where the influencer had behaved especially poorly. This type of response was by Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020) described as a "reactive disassociation" and is often motivated by the pressure exerted by the public and has a tendency to appear more deliberate by emphasising the decision-making processes behind the decision (Kintu & Ben-Slimane, 2020).

> I would not stay silent. Everything depends on the severity, and for some things there is no reason to blow wind into the fire, but often it is better to be straightforward, short and precise about how you have handled it. And trying to not put too much emotion in that communication but be very objective.
>
> Respondent 2

Respondent 2 suggests that public responses should be to-the-point and not leveraging the situation. This was echoed by the other respondents who discussed public response. Several respondents wanted to maintain transparency to the public. Public response only aimed at ensuring that the public is not under the impression that the organisation approves of the behaviour of the

influencer, respondents argued. No respondent identified opportunities for themselves in relation to the public response, unlike what Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020) suggests as the "proactive dissociation" strategy. This strategy aims at combating criticism before it arises and to leverage the opportunity to strengthen their image (Kintu & Ben-Slimane, 2020). Whilst respondents could identify that other organisations had taken advantage of situations to gain publicity and taken the opportunity to demonstrate their values, the respondents themselves found it unethical to strive for personal gain in the situation.

Although finding it ethically questionable, respondents could identify an opportunity with cancel culture for organisations. Respondent 2 explained that organisations can take advantage of situations where an influencer has been cancelled to generate publicity and "collect points". Several respondents agreed and claimed that issuing a public response to an influencer being cancelled could aim at favourably affecting the public perception of the brand: the brand image (Kapferer, 2012). Whilst influencer marketing is often performed with the intention of reinforcing brand values through associating with influencers who communicate these values (Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2019), actively positioning against influencers in conflict with these values could also reinforce them. Additionally, having a public response could generate publicity and thus build awareness for the brand, helping them reach new audiences.

6 Discussion

In the following section, the findings from the data collection and analysis will be discussed in the context of the existing body of knowledge and previous research. Further, contributions from the study will be discussed in a general manner, depicting new insight and understandings gained from the empirical findings.

6.1 The Volatile Industry of Influencer Marketing

The empirical findings from this study suggest that influencer marketing is playing an increasingly important part in *promotion* in the 4P model described by Kotler, Armstrong and Parment (2017). As suggested by Mangold and Faulds (2009) and Hair, Clark and Shapiro, (2010), this study found that the traditional promotion mix is challenged for organisations, that much like scholars (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Kozinets et al., 2010) believe there is much to be gained from integrating influencer marketing in the promotion mix. The research also suggests, as illustrated by Gustavsson (2022), that influencer marketing can be used as a more or less integrated part of the overall marketing strategy. Elaborating on the model of Gustavsson (2022), the study suggests that the integration of influencer marketing in the promotion mix, and which strategy is adopted by an organisation depends on the objective, target group and perception of risk with influencer marketing. Organisations that perceive influencer marketing to constitute high risk were less likely to replace their traditional promotional tools or to integrate influencer marketing in their promotion mix.

The findings suggest that organisations are recognising the value of integrating influencer marketing in their marketing strategy and promotion mix to different extents. The incentive of influencer marketing has been explored by precious scholars (Djafarova & Rushworth 2017; Lou & Yuan 2019), pointing to the cost-effectiveness and high conversion rate as a result of the perceived trustworthiness and credibility of influencers towards their followers and the target group. The empirical findings of this study confirmed these incentives thus implying that organisations could identify both short and long-term benefits from being associated with the influencer, often related to the influencer's image exerting a spill-over effect on the organisation's brand image.

The volatility of social media and the developments in the external environment were found to be important factors affecting the influencer marketing industry. Previous research suggests that the volatility of the industry makes both researching and practising influencer marketing by best practice a difficult task (Taylor, 2020). These beliefs were reassured by the respondents included in this study. Previous research has pointed to the covid-19 pandemic, emergence of new platforms,

social media trends and increased trust and use of social media by younger generations (Taylor, 2020) as developments that have advanced the popularity and effectiveness of influencer marketing. The results of this study also suggest that organisations' attention and interest in influencer marketing has increased. However, the reasoning for this development was not disclosed in this study as it goes beyond the scope of the paper and would have been speculative.

6.2 Cancel Culture as a Managerial Issue

All respondents could testify to the emergence of cancel culture, and identified similar processes involved with a cancellation. The phenomenon was observed, at times experienced, and always feared. It was evident that cancel culture had managerial implications, due to being perceived as constituting direct and indirect risks for organisations working with influencer marketing. Although influencer marketing has since its beginnings been perceived as a risky market communication strategy due to its novelty, volatility, and lack of control, cancel culture has seemingly added yet another factor of risk associated with the market communication strategy. Previous deliberations involved with influencer marketing, such as the size of the influencer, the extent of the collaboration, the influencer's personal character and the inherent human factor of working with profiles, has evidently been affected by the emergence of cancel culture. Whilst these factors have previously been evaluated to achieve objectives with influencer marketing, cancel culture has caused them to also be perceived as constituting various extents of risk.

Much like suggested by previous literature (Um & Kim, 2016; Keller, 2020; Cornwell, Humphreys & Kwon, 2022), leveraging the association between an influencer and an organisation was perceived as one of the primary incentives for engaging in influencer marketing. Yet, it was the association that subsequently caused organisations to be affected by an influencer becoming cancelled. Practical implications of cancel culture acknowledged by scholars (Lewis & Christin, 2020; Tandoc et al., 2022), such as the cancelled influencer losing followers and thus influencer marketing activities losing reach, was not identified as a risk for organisations although it would result in a lower return on investment. An influencer being cancelled would compromise their brand equity as it constitutes a loss of credibility (Abbasi et al., 2022), but also the shared brand equity which has been established between the influencer and the organisation (Cornwell, Humphreys & Kwon, 2022). The value of the influencer marketing would thus be lost and could instead cause damage to the brand of the organisation. It was namely the association which was identified, and treated, as the risk for organisations. Whilst the associative link to profiles has been previously acknowledged as a risk for organisations (Till & Shimp, 1998; Kittel & Stango, 2014; Um & Kim, 2016; Giertz et al., 2022), particularly cancel culture has not previously been treated as a risk. This study has contributed empirical evidence which indicates that cancel culture is perceived as a risk for being associated with an influencer through influencer marketing,

integrating the respective research fields of influencer marketing, cancel culture and decision making.

Respondents found several factors to induce the risk of cancel culture for influencer marketing, all which relate to the association between the organisation and the influencer. The factors respond to the central decisions involved in the decision-making process defined by Martínez-López et al. (2020). The decisions regarding the size of the influencer, the extent of the association between the organisation between influencer and organisation as well as the personality of the influencer were evidently affected by the emergence of cancel culture. What the empirical findings suggest is however that these components are in practice evaluated not only to achieve objectives but also to estimate the risk they entail. This proved to be volatile, yet susceptible to the previously mentioned factors. Thus, this study suggests an additional step to the five-step planning process proposed by Lin, Bruning, and Swarna (2018), where risk of the influencer marketing is assessed through the matching process. A revision of the decision-making process is required, weighing the objective of for example size and reach versus the risk of the influencer being cancelled. Influencer marketing was however perceived to constitute an inherent risk due to the human factor. Although some factors decreased respectively increased the perception of risk, no influencer marketing collaboration was entirely exempt from risk. Drawing on a parallel to celebrity endorsements, respondents found that associating your brand with a person has always caused liabilities for organisations. In this regard, components of cancel culture were not seen as restricted to the contemporary social media climate.

The social media climate was not perceived by respondents as the primary enabling factor for cancel culture, despite what literature suggests (Ng, 2020; Tandoc et al., 2022; Ahuja & Kerketta, 2021). Rather, the respondents in this study perceived traditional media such as newspapers and tabloids to be the primary facilitator of cancel culture. This could however be due to the tensions on the market, where the competition between traditional media and social media runs high (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Influencer marketing professionals might also shy away from accusing social media users, as these are their end consumers. Professionals were required to adapt to the demands of consumers, with the logic of competitors in mind.

Overall, the initial incentives for engaging in influencer marketing were not substantially challenged and the approach to influencer marketing was still predominantly positive. No respondent found the risk overbearing the opportunities, but rather identified that the new developments would affect decision making processes moving forward. Primarily the decision-making processes involving mitigation of risk were found to be in need of revision, and many respondents identified a lack of both precedents and established guidelines, which resulted in decision making in regard to cancel culture to become an instinctive process.

It is also feasible that the respondents in their professional role had concerns about being overly critical of influencer marketing as it is the industry they belong to. As Alvesson (2003) brought forward, interview respondents have a tendency to justify their own attitudes and behaviour in order to create accounts which are "morally adequate" (p. 17). Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that respondent's concern with this narrative could also have implications for how respondents disclose their perceptions and strategies for mitigating risk. Respondents could avoid either embracing or neglecting perceptions or practices in accordance with what they consider as morally adequate reasoning. As researchers, it is not possible to ensure that this accurately reflects practice. It is also noteworthy that many respondents only had hypothetical accounts of strategies to mitigate risk, as they had no direct experience of the phenomenon. These accounts are clearly affected by the ideals respondents' hold.

6.3 Mitigating the Risk in Practice

The respondents practised many similar strategies to mitigate the risk of cancel culture for influencer marketing. It became evident by the accounts of respondents that the different strategies responded both to the sequence of events involved in cancel culture as well as how integrated influencer marketing was in the market communication mix by the organisations.

The matching process as well as *track record and background check* were frequently adapted strategies practised prior to committing to an influencer and engaging with them in influencer marketing. Making an informed decision and limiting liabilities was seen as central to not only mitigating risk, but also to ensure a successful collaboration. After committing to an influencer and engaging with them in influencer marketing, *legal precautions* and *relationship building* were adopted to mitigate the risk of cancel culture stemming from the collaboration. Just as with the strategies adopted prior to the collaboration, these are also to be perceived as proactive strategies preventing the organisation from being associated with a cancelled influencer.
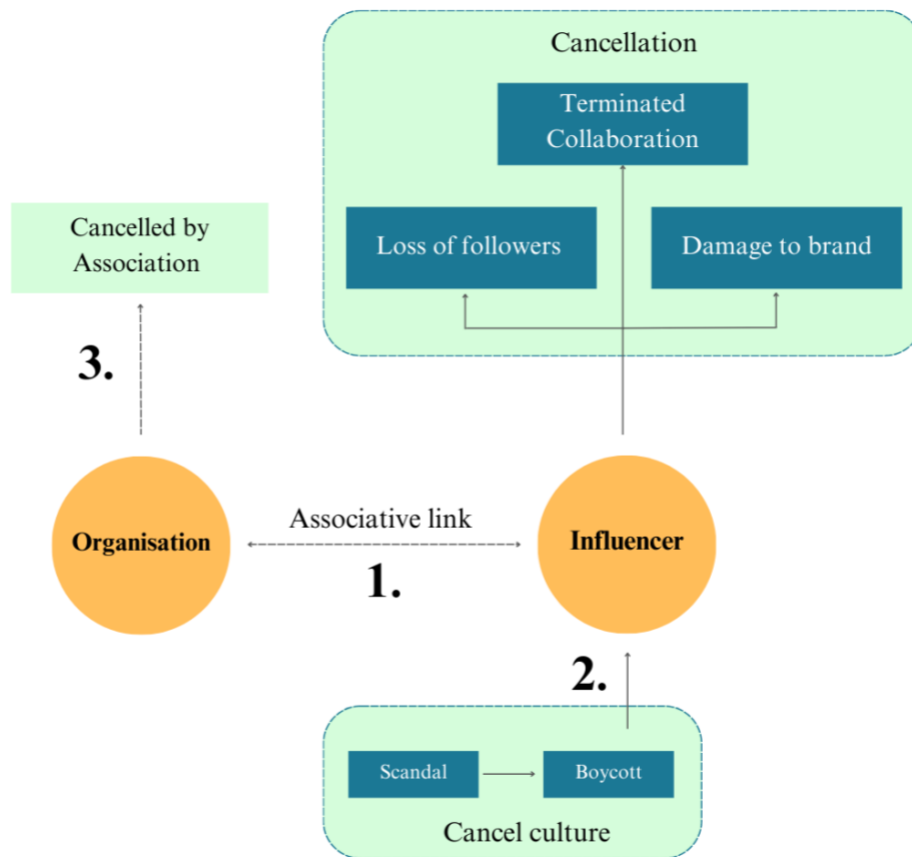
Figure 5: The Conceptual Framework with Numbers for Reference

The proactive strategies aim at preventing the sequence of events illustrated in Figure 5 from occurring. First, the matching process and track record and background check aimed at the organisation mitigating the risk of becoming collateral damage through the associative link with an influencer targeted by cancel culture thus not establishing the associative link to a cancelled influencer, seen in point 1 in Figure 5. This illustrates the concern with brand safety as brought forward by Bishop (2021), although the respondents implemented the processes manually rather than turning to the algorithms observed in Bishop's (2021) study. The content which was screened for in these processes were primarily the same as claimed by Bishop (2021), essentially anything which could be seen as a potential catalyst of controversies. Implementing these early measures aimed at excluding the organisations' part of cancel culture entirely and not establishing an associative link to an influencer seen as likely to be cancelled. However, the study suggests that these sequences are hard to predict and thus control due to the human factor.

Second, legal precautions and relationship building aim rather at protecting the influencer from becoming a target of cancel culture, stopping the causality of events to transfer from cancel culture to the influencer, see point 2 in Figure 5. Although there was a consensus among respondents that conclusive control is unachievable in influencer marketing, which is also reflective of claims in literature (Bishop, 2021; Giertz et al., 2022), these measures practically aimed at obtaining control to limit the influencer committing a transgression or exhibiting moral misconduct. Although the preventive measures are accounted for in literature (Bishop, 2021; Gustavsson, 2022), they have not previously been explored to mitigate risk of cancel culture explicitly. However, the empirical findings made it evident that professionals practically utilised them within the context of cancel culture. The effectiveness in doing so was debatable: although taking legal precautions through contracts is an industry standard, the vague formulations and lack of precedents can make them difficult to enact. Additionally, even though contracts could enable quick termination of the collaborations and make the influencer liable for damages, the implications of enacting them was associated with the adjacent risk of damaging the relationship with influencers, agencies, and the industry as a whole due to the close-knit relationships within the industry. Relationship building was also perceived as an ambiguous practice, which could not guarantee regulation of the influencer's behaviour.

The reactive strategies were divided into *silent response* and *public response*. These response strategies shared many similarities to the response strategies defined by Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020), but more assimilated to the context of cancel culture. As these strategies were adopted in situations where the influencer has already been cancelled, preventive action was deemed as no longer relevant, and strategies now aimed at protecting the own brand. Although respondents could identify that publicly partaking in cancel culture would worsen the situation, no respondent identified a possibility to limit the effects of the cancellation for the influencers. The phenomenon was perceived as unmanageable. Rather, the silent and public response respectively aimed at breaking the associative link with the influencer as seen in Point 1 or preventing the organisation from being cancelled by association as seen in Point 3. Silent response often aimed at not calling attention to the collaboration, as this could potentially reinforce an association which perhaps was not prevalent to consumers. However, respondents feared that it could also cause speculations about the organisation's stance on the cancelled influencer or be seen as a rejection of accountability, which could potentially increase the risk of being cancelled by association. Public response instead aimed at leveraging the termination of the collaboration to substantiate the own brand image. In contrast to the silent response, public response entails the risk of calling attention to an association which was perhaps not prevalent to consumers. Public responses will also undergo scrutiny from both traditional media and consumers, as these responses tend to generate publicity for the organisation that could potentially lead to long-term associations between the cancelled influencer and organisation to the public, unintentionally achieving the opposite effect. Unlike in the traditional context of crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Greyser, 2009) where

public disclosure is encouraged this study thus suggests that there are many incentives of acting in silence and not disclosing involvement with a cancelled influencer.

The context of the situation was emphasised as a determining factor for the silent or public response, much like encouraged by scholars (Louie & Obermiller, 2002; Zhou & Whitla, 2013). Even if a silent or public response strategy is adopted, the study suggests that influencer marketing professionals believe that damage to the brand is already done and cannot be eliminated, but only minimised through reactive strategies.

The empirical findings were affected by the perspectives of respondents. Although respondents could often identify the prevalence and implementation of all strategies in the industry, they evaluated the strategies differently for their own organisations. How integrated influencer marketing was in the market communication mix proved to determine how effective different strategies were. Although the matching process and relationship building was always deemed as important, other proactive strategies were not considered to the same extent by the professionals using influencer marketing as a silo or as part of the communication mix (Gustavsson, 2022). For these respondents, public response was also not deemed as appropriate. It was primarily those working with influencer marketing at the core that worked proactively with risk and that would consider using a public response when an influencer has been cancelled. The respondents representing influencer marketing agencies resonated similarly on behalf of the advertising organisation.

Although it was evident that the respondents with similar professional backgrounds resorted to the same practices when mitigating risk, although lacking a common foundation for doing so. These practices were often not established in relation to cancel culture specifically and were not developed with the objective of mitigating the risk of cancel culture, even though respondents found their outcome to do so. Seemingly, the identified themes in regard to the second research question prevailed due to professionals resonating similarly.

6.4 Cancel or Get Cancelled: The spiral of cancel culture

Whether the respondents estimated the emergence of cancel culture to escalate, decline or remain at the current level did not appear in the empirical material. What became prevalent however, was that respondents considered their own participation in cancel culture to contribute to the acceleration of the phenomenon.

As stated by Clark (2020) and Lokhande and Natu (2022), the mechanisms of cancel culture are not new. This was also the prevalent perception among many respondents who could identify the risk in the predecessor to influencer marketing, celebrity endorsements. What is new however, is

the pace in which cancel culture occurs as well as facilitating platforms on social media, as highlighted by Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020) when explaining the contemporary conditions to combat scandal. Additionally, respondents argued that influencers are susceptible to an especially high level of monitoring. Although this lacks evidentiary support in literature, it is noteworthy that influencers are more visible and accessible than the traditional celebrity due to their constant presence on social media. Organisations are also more visible and accessible due to social media presence, causing their relationships to various stakeholders, such as influencers, to also be under scrutiny. Whether an organisation's collaboration with an influencer is active or prescribed did not always matter to the public, according to the empirical findings. This is furthermore supported by association theory (Till & Shimp, 1998; Um & Kim, 2016; Louie & Obenmiller, 2002), illustrating that the associations can be based on either vague or untrue entanglements yet be experienced as real by consumers.

By respondents, it was feared that a lack of visible action could be perceived as approval of the behaviour of a cancelled influencer. This fear is partly justified, according to the empirical evidence by Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020). Whilst organisations can experience that the public is exerting pressure on the organisation to act and feel eager to break the association to the influencer, a public response is not an obsolete solution to the association. The empirical findings pointed to the ethical considerations involved with contributing to the negative effects for the influencer as well as sustaining the phenomenon in itself. In a way, the conflict comes down to either sacrificing the influencer or suffering from the consequences: cancel or get cancelled. But, as highlighted by Kintu and Ben-Slimane (2020) one person publicly distancing themselves from an influencer will cause others to follow. This reasoning was echoed by respondents that considered the actions of the influencer's other stakeholders as indicative for themselves. Prevailing this reasoning, is a ripple effect causing all stakeholders to experience pressure to follow, and thus contributing to the continuation of cancel culture. This was, for several respondents, an incentive for incorporating proactive strategies or for favouring a silent response. These empirical findings suggest that the managerial approach to cancel culture entails a balancing of own interests and willingness to participate in, and thus contributing to the phenomenon that ultimately affect all organisations working with influencer marketing.

7 Conclusion

This section aims at summarising the central findings of the empirical research and establish how these respond to the research questions. It furthermore acknowledges the limitations of the study, and accounts for its theoretical and managerial implications, to lastly glance forward to the future of the research field.

7.1 Research Findings

The purpose of this paper was to explore the effects of cancel culture for the perception of risk in influencer marketing, and the strategies that are adopted to mitigate the risk of cancel culture. For this purpose, two research questions were formulated:

> *RQ1*: How does the emergence of cancel culture affect professionals' perception of risks concerning influencer marketing?

> *RQ2:* Which strategies are adopted by organisations to mitigate the risk of cancel culture for influencer marketing?

The empirical findings from this study suggests that the emergence of cancel culture is affecting professionals' perception of risks concerning influencer marketing in multiple ways. The associative link established between the influencer and the organisation was brought forward as the central aspect constituting risk in cancel culture. It was recurring in the data collection that organisations identified a risk with being associated with a cancelled influencer, as it could potentially cause negative spill-over effect onto the organisation's brand. The fear of being associated with a cancelled influencer affected the decision-making process involving influencer marketing. Several factors involved in the decision making were identified to increase or decrease the risk of cancel culture: the size of the influencer, the extent of the collaboration, the character of the influencer and the human factor.

The study found that the emergence of cancel culture has affected the perception of risk constituted by different sizes of influencers which consequently added a risk evaluation dimension to the decision-making process in regards to size. Respondents did not agree which type of influencer constituted the highest likelihood of being cancelled, with both small and large influencers being perceived as having respective characteristics which could cause them to become the target of cancel culture. While the perception of which size of influencer constituted more risk varied amongst managers, other factors increasing the risk of a cancellation were prevalent. The extent of the collaboration with the influencer was unanimously perceived to determine how strong the

associative link was between the influencer and the organisation, which consequently determined how affected the organisation would be if the influencer was cancelled. Although incentives for having highly involved collaborations were central for leveraging the credibility of the influencer, respondents found having a higher quantity of weaker associations to influencers to be more risk averse.

Employing an influencer with a strong personality and relatable characteristics was also seen as constituting an increased risk for cancel culture. Although they favourably utilise the unique propositions of influencer marketing, their self-disclosure and availability caused them to be perceived as more of a liability and thus more likely to be cancelled. The human factor was also acknowledged as an inherent risk with influencer marketing which constitutes exposure to cancel culture. As organisations cannot control the personal lives of influencers, they cannot prevent them from committing a transgression or moral misconduct. It was recurring in the data collection that this risk is not possible to eradicate, and that is no different from collaboration with other types of public figures. The identification of these factors indicate that cancel culture has changed the perception of risk with influencer marketing, and although this risk was manageable to some extent, it was never truly evadable.

The identified strategies that organisations adopted to mitigate the risk of cancel culture for influencer marketing were divided into proactive and reactive. The identified proactive strategies were: the matching process, track record and background check, legal precautions and relationship building. The reactive strategies were silent response and public response. It was found that the matching process, referring to the process of selecting which influencer to work with and determining the fit between the respective brands of the organisation and the influencer, as well researching the influencer's track record and conducting a background check, aimed at mitigating the risk by not committing to an influencer that could potentially be cancelled. Legal precautions and relationship building rather mitigated the risk of a currently employed influencer being targeted by cancel culture. The reactive strategies instead aimed at preventing the associative link to cause the organisation to be *cancelled by association* by the cancelled influencer. How integrated influencer marketing was in an organisation's market communication proved to be a determining factor for which proactive and reactive strategies were deemed appropriate by respondents.

7.2 Limitations

The results of the study were subject to a number of factors. First, the study was limited to its geographical context. As established in delimitations, all respondents were situated and working in Sweden, a highly individualistic, democratic, and technologically competent culture inevitably causing a cultural bias in the data collection. It is worth noting that influencer marketing in Sweden

is much more progressive and legitimised than in other countries, thus, the results are not applicable to other cultural settings.

Furthermore, the sampled professionals represent managerial or specialist perspectives at both inhouse and consultant roles. The variation in respondents has provided the study with a holistic view of the influencer marketing industry as such, but has limited the potential depth of certain accounts. If the sampled respondents had similar roles at similar organisations, the analysis could have sustained a greater depth. The result of this study has been partially affected by using separate interview guides, which was necessary for interviewing respondents with such different roles.

7.3 Theoretical Implications

This study has contributed to an integrated framework of the respective research fields of influencer marketing and cancel culture, which previously constituted a gap in literature and lack of exploration. Within influencer marketing research, this study contributed to the introduction of new conceptualisations for risk in influencer marketing which presents new implications for decision making for influencer marketing. The findings suggest that the risk and its adjacent strategies constitute complex managerial decision making which must be integrated in the evaluation of influencer marketing as a market communication strategy, developing on existing theories implementation of influencer marketing and decision making. The conclusion of this study indicates that mitigating risk should be an integrated part of the decision-making process, providing an additional element to the central decisions established in previous influencer marketing research.

For the yet growing body of research on cancel culture, this study contributes with an original perspective on the phenomenon, suggesting that organisations perceive that they can become affected not only by their own possible transgressions and moral misconduct, but also by being associated with a cancelled influencer. Whilst association is often perceived as a favourable outcome of influencer marketing, the findings of this study conceptualise association in cancel culture as a risk. By applying associative network theory to the context of influencers and associated organisations within cancel culture, the phenomenon is shown to cause implications for decision making within brand management research on influencer marketing.

By providing empirical findings of both perceptions of cancel culture and strategies adapted to mitigate the risk of cancel culture for organisations working with influencer marketing, scholars can continue to expand the currently insufficient state of research acknowledging the implications of cancel culture for organisations working with influencer marketing.

7.4 Managerial Implications

The novelty of the phenomenon cancel culture coupled with the dynamic and agile pace of developments within influencer marketing suggests that managers must be swift to adapt to contemporary challenges. By identifying and exploring the various perceptions of cancel culture among industry professionals, managers can increase their understanding of the phenomenon. Furthermore, by pinpointing the decisions perceived to affect the risk of cancel culture, managers can be aided in their future decision-making processes in influencer marketing. For their future influencer marketing purposes, managers should thus consider the size of the influencer, the extent of the collaboration, the personal character of the influencer and the human factor to evaluate the risk of cancel culture. For example, managers that wish to implement a risk-averse influencer marketing strategy could thus select an aspirational influencer with a smaller following for a short-term collaboration. It should be noted that overly prioritising the mitigation of risk could compromise the objectives of the influencer marketing.

Whilst practices to mitigate the risk of cancel culture with influencer marketing were often enforced, the strategies largely lacked premeditation and established procedures. Although this study does not provide claims of best practice, the various strategies identified in the data collection and presented in the empirical analysis present managers with defined and distinct, proactive and reactive strategies. Proactive strategies, implemented before an influencer was cancelled, did not entail mutually exclusive decisions and could thus all be implemented to varying extents depending on the integration of influencer marketing in the market communication strategy. However, relationships with industry stakeholders should always be prioritised. Reactive strategies could require more deliberate decision making, as silent and public responses are mutually exclusive and have an external communicative output. This study suggests that choosing a reactive strategy when an influencer that is associated with the organisation becomes the target of cancel culture should be considered in the situational context and determined according to what best interrupts the associative link. However, it should also be considered that both strategies constitute different risks for the organisation.

Influencers could also be aided by the findings of this study. Whilst the study did not explore their perspective of being a target of cancel culture, it could further their understanding of the perceptions and strategies adopted in response to cancel culture by their collaborative partners. By understanding what factors determine how their own risk is evaluated, and how organisations mitigate this risk, influencers could also develop their decision-making processes regarding their own brand, and their marketing collaborations. It could present implications for the influencers own content, as well as their behaviour outside of social media, as this could affect organisations' perceived risk of employing them.

7.5 Suggestions for Future Research

The emergence of cancel culture presents a rich area for future research within influencer marketing. Whilst this study took the perspective of organisations using influencer marketing as market communication, the data collection suggested that the perspective of influencers experiencing cancel culture could entail rich theoretical contributions. By conducting a qualitative study interviewing influencers about their perceptions and experiences of cancel culture, a holistic understanding of the influencer marketing industry can be obtained.

Furthermore, the uncharted territory of the implications for organisations caused by cancel culture cause strategies to mitigate risk to oftentimes be instinctive practices lacking legitimate theoretical anchoring. Future research should thus aim at establishing effective proactive strategies, as well as reactive escalation strategies to cancel culture. This study did not explore the frequency of the adopted strategies in the industry, nor evaluate effectiveness of the identified strategies. For proactive strategies, this matter might not be as critical as the different strategies are not mutually exclusive. However, for the reactive strategies future research should investigate the respective effects of the different responses. Exploring consumer perceptions through suggestively netnographic data collection, exploring online discourse surrounding incidents of influencers being cancelled organisations associated with the influencer implementing either a silent or public response. Other qualitative methods could also be used to explore this matter, such as focus groups with consumers. A quantitative approach, through questionnaires, might also prove appropriate to measure consumer perceptions to the respective responses.

The identified risks in this study suggest that new, revised decision-making frameworks for influencer marketing are required due to the emergence of cancel culture. Future research could aim to provide frameworks to support managers in the decision-making process, implementing a thorough evaluation of risk in their future influencer marketing endeavours. Through qualitative managerial research, researchers could gain the perspective required to develop this theory further.

Lastly, this study is limited to the Nordic region and the number of professionals participating. An interesting approach to further research would be to explore the phenomenon of cancel culture in the context of influencer marketing from a global perspective to gain a wider understanding. Alternatively, focusing on organisations within a specific field, such as fashion or food, would provide a deeper understanding. Conducting a case study or comparative multiple case study within a specified field would thus be a suggestion. The interview guides implemented through the data collection of this study could be repurposed, as this would provide insight of changes and new perspectives within the field.

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Appendix 1a: Invitation to Participate in Study Sent to Prospective Respondents

Would you like to contribute to a study about influencer marketing at Lunds University?

I am a master student currently scouting for pros in influencer marketing to participate in an interview for my master's thesis, and your profile is the perfect fit! If we connect I can tell you more about it.

Appendix 1b: Description of Study Sent to Prospective Respondents

Hi [prospective respondent]

We are two master students at Lund University School of Economics and Management who are currently writing our master thesis in International Marketing and Brand Management. In brief, our study is about influencer marketing in a social media climate paved by constant scrutiny and judgmental audiences.

We reached out to you because we saw that you work with [role description] at [organisation where respondent is employed] and thought you could have interesting insights on the topic! We think that [organisation where respondent is employed] in particular is an inspiring company with a strong brand and we would love to hear more about how you work.

We would love to arrange a Zoom-meeting whenever it is convenient for you, perhaps some time during the coming weeks? We estimate that the interview should take between 30 minutes and an hour. Your participation would of course be anonymous. We think that the results from the study will be of great value for you at [company] and will gladly share the finished paper with you!

If you have any questions, shoot!

Appendix 2a: Interview Guide for In-house Professionals

Thank you for participating in this interview, we are very much looking forward to hearing more about your work. First, we would like to introduce what we are writing about. There is a lot of literature about influencer marketing, but we feel as though there is a perspective that is lacking - that is the potential risks with using influencer marketing. As we know, the internet can be a hostile environment, and therefore we want to look at how influencer marketing is affected by negative trends.

We are going to start off the interview by asking about your work, your perspective, and experiences of influencer marketing, then move forward to your perception of emerging trends and possible risks concerning influencer marketing. Feel free to expand on the points you feel are relevant, draw on experience or stories.

We also want to ask you:
- Do you wish to be anonymous? We think that we are going to make all the participants anonymous.
- Is it okay if we record? We will just use the audio to transcribe the interview, and it will not be shared with anyone else.

Introduction

Can you tell me about your role at [organisation]?

How would you describe your [organisations] brand in short?
- What are your mission and vision?
- Who are your customers?
    - (How do you want to be perceived by your potential customers/customers?)

Influencer marketing

Could you describe your marketing strategy shortly?
- What are the most important communication tools according to you? Why?
- What type of marketing activities do you perform to gain new customers or gain loyalty?
- Is social media marketing an important tool in your marketing strategy?
    - If yes: In what ways is it more effective than other tools?
    - If no: Why not?

Could you describe your influencer marketing strategy?
- Is influencer marketing a big part of your promotion strategy?
    - Is yes, what are the implications you have found?
        - What have you gained from it?
        - How do you measure success within your influencer marketing activities?
    - If no, why not?
- What type of influencers do you work with? Why?
    - Profile, size, audience, brand, values, message?
- (What is the main goal of your influencer activities?)
- What type of activities do you perform? Why these in particular?

Risk evaluation

How long have you worked with influencer marketing?
- Can you identify any developments/differences from when you started to now?
    - More or less important now?
- What do you think are the reasons for these changes?

Can you identify any risks with using influencer marketing?
- If yes: Can you provide examples? Have you ever experienced this?
- If no: ok

Are there any differences in risk according to the size, type of audience or profile of the influencer?

Are there any differences in risk depending on the type of endorsement or collaboration you perform? E.g clothing lines, sponsored hauls, sponsored posts or affiliate links?

Do you have any strategies to minimise potential risks?
- Would you describe your approach as proactive or reactive?

Cancel culture

Are you familiar with the term 'cancel culture'?
- If yes: What does it mean to you?
- If no: [present definition and exemplify]. Is this something you have experienced?

Have any of the influencers you worked with been caught up in a similar situation?
- If yes: How did you respond?

- If no: There have been quite a few examples of cancellation of influencers, such as Margaux Dietz, Paolo Roberto etc. Has this awakened any discussions at your company about potential risk of influencer marketing?

Do you think that it is a risk for the company to be associated with an influencer that has been cancelled?
- In cases of cancel culture, companies have been fast to terminate their collaboration with the influencer. Why do you think they respond like this?

Is there any type of influencer that you think are more prone to be cancelled?

Is the effects of cancel culture something you acknowledge or consider in your day to day work with influencers? In which ways?

Do you have any established guidelines for when an influencer does something which causes them to be cancelled?
- What are the precautions?

Appendix 2b: Interview Guide for Consulting Professionals

Thank you for participating in this interview, we are very much looking forward to hearing more about your work. First, we would like to introduce what we are writing about. There is a lot of literature about influencer marketing, but we feel as though there is a perspective that is lacking - that is the potential risks with using influencer marketing. As we know, the internet can be a hostile environment, and therefore we want to look at how influencer marketing is affected by negative trends.

We are going to start off the interview by asking about your work, your perspective, and experiences of influencer marketing, then move forward to your perception of emerging trends and possible risks concerning influencer marketing. Feel free to expand on the points you feel are relevant, draw on experience or stories.

We also want to ask you:
- Do you wish to be anonymous? We think that we are going to make all the participants anonymous.
- Is it okay if we record? We will just use the audio to transcribe the interview, and it will not be shared with anyone else.

Introduction

How would you describe your agency in short?
- What are your mission and vision?
- Who are your customers?
    - (How do you want to be perceived by your potential customers/customers?)

Influencer marketing

Briefly, what does the process look like, from a request from a company to a complete campaign/endorsement/product?

Why do you think influencer marketing is such an effective promotion strategy?
- What are the unique benefits compared to other promotion strategies?
- How do you measure success for an influencer marketing campaign?

What do companies request from influencers in your experience? Expectations etc.

How do you match companies with influencers? Which criteria are important?

- Profile, size, audience, brand, values, message?
- (What is the main goal of your influencer activities?)

What type of activities do you perform? Why these in particular?

Risk evaluation

How long have you worked with influencer marketing?
- Can you identify any developments/differences from when you started to now?
    - More or less important now?
- What do you think are the reasons for these changes?

Can you identify any risks for companies using influencer marketing?
- If yes: Can you provide examples? Have you ever experienced this?
- If no: ok

Are there any differences in risk according to the size, type of audience or profile of the influencer?

How specific are the expectations of the influencer? What does a contract usually contain?

Do you have any strategies to minimise potential risks?
- Would you describe your approach as proactive or reactive?

Cancel culture

Are you familiar with the term 'cancel culture'?
- If yes: What does it mean to you?
- If no: [present definition and exemplify]. Is this something you have experienced?

Have any of the influencers you worked with been caught up in a similar situation?
- If yes: How did you respond?
- If no: There have been quite a few examples of cancellation of influencers, such as Margaux Dietz, Paolo Roberto etc. Has this awakened any discussions at your company about potential risk of influencer marketing?

Do you think that it is a risk for a company to be associated with an influencer that has been cancelled?
- In cases of cancel culture, companies have been fast to terminate their collaboration with the influencer. Why do you think they respond like this?

Is there any type of influencer that you think are more prone to be cancelled?

Do you have any established guidelines for when an influencer does something which causes them to be cancelled?
- What are the precautions?

Do you think there are any ways to minimise the risk of working with an influencer that could potentially be cancelled? Is there anyway to prevent a spillover effect on the endorsed brand if the influencer is cancelled?

Appendix 3: An Example of the Thematic Coding

Initial code	First theme	Sub-theme	Final theme	Quote
Thinks it adds more value for money working with micro-influencers as they offer a more niche audience and are often more quality-oriented	Benefit of using micro influencers in decision making	Incentives for micro influencers	*Size matters*	"I personally believe a lot in micro influencers because you can't like... There are very few people who can afford to buy [name of mega influencer], or anyone else of that size"
Explains that the choice of type of influencer depends on the goal of the activity- incentives differs with objective	Incentives for both types of influencers - objective	Size depends on objective	*Size matters*	"if the goal is to increase the number of new consumer, we may need to work with influencers that can bring in new consumers through partnerships, but if the goal is to increase brand awareness, then we should work with influencers that can generate a lot of traffic to the website"
Thinks that bigger influencers are more prone to be cancelled and this constitutes a bigger risk	Working with macro influencers constitutes more risk	Risk differs according to size	*Size matters*	I believe that the bigger you are and the stronger your brand as an influencer is, the bigger is the risk of [being cancelled] if you compare to a smaller influencer. I do not think that the media is as interested in you [...] the bigger and stronger you are as a media channel, the bigger is the risk that you are on the radar.
Thinks that smaller influencers are a can be risky as they are less professional and used to the industry	Working with micro influencers constitutes risk	Risk differs according to size	*Size matters*	"...And when it comes to smaller influencers, in my experience, there is unfortunately sometimes a lack of professionalism there, because they might have a different profession and do influencer work on the side as a hobby to earn some extra money, which is fun. But they may not really be aware of how the industry is structured, what rules apply, and so on."