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Cancelled or comeback
How influencers use crisis communication on social media in response to cancel culture

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Abstract

“Cancelled or comeback: How influencers use crisis communication on social media in response to cancel culture ”

This study has examined how influencers as personal brands use crisis communication in response to cancel culture on social media. The purpose has been to investigate how Swedish influencers construct their personal brand and how these brands become subject to cancellation, as well as how crisis communication is used to repair reputational damage during the crisis phase. The study was grounded in strategic communication and applies a qualitative research design based on a comparative case study of two Swedish influencers Matilda Djerf and Margaux Dietz. The empirical material consists of Instagram posts published by the influencers before and during their respective crisis. The analysis was conducted through a thematic analysis and was done using an integrated theoretical framework combining: Personal branding, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Repair Theory (IRT). The study concludes that cancel culture in relation to influencers can be understood as a crisis process closely connected to the communicative construction of personal brands, and the relational dynamics of social media. Influencers become particularly vulnerable to cancellation because their brands are built on perceived authenticity, moral credibility and emotional closeness, while simultaneously being negotiated and evaluated by audiences in digital environments. Consequently, crisis communication during cancellations involves not only repairing reputation, but also restoring trust and legitimacy in relation to the values communicated through the personal brand. The findings further show that influencers primarily rely on rebuild strategies, especially apology, mortification and corrective action, while also combining these with contextual explanations and bolstering to manage responsibility and protect their brand identity.

Keywords: Brand Communication, Crisis Communication, Cancel culture, Personal brands, Influencers, SCCT, IRT, Social media.

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Sammanfattning

“Cancellerad eller revansch: Hur influencers använder kriskommunikation på sociala medier som respons på cancel kultur”

Denna studie har undersökt hur influencers som personliga varumärken använder kriskommunikation som respons på cancel kultur på sociala medier. Syftet har varit att undersöka hur svenska influencers kontrasterar sina personliga varumärken och hur dessa varumärken blir föremål för cancellering, samt hur kriskommunikation används för att reparera reputationsskador under krisfasen. Studien är förankrad i strategisk kommunikation och bygger på en kvalitativ forskningsdesign där en jämförande fallstudie av två svenska influencers Matilda Djerf och Margaux Dietz genomförts. Det empiriska materialet består av Instagram inlägg publicerade av influenserna före och under deras respektive kriser. Analysen genomfördes med en tematisk analys och tolkas genom ett integrerat ramverk bestående av teorier om: Personligt varumärke, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) och Image Repair Theory (IRT). Studien drar slutsatsen att cancelkultur i relation till influencers kan förstås som en krisprocess som är nära kopplad till den kommunikativa konstruktionen av personliga varumärken, och sociala mediers relationella dynamik. Influencers blir särskilt sårbara för cancelkultur eftersom deras varumärken bygger på upplevd autenticitet, moralisk trovärdighet och emotionell närhet, samtidigt som de kontinuerligt förhandlas och utvärderas av publiken i digitala miljöer. Därmed innebär kriskommunikation vid cancellering inte enbart att reparera ett rykte, utan även att återupprätta förtroende och legitimitet i relation till de värden som kommuniceras genom det personliga varumärket. Resultaten visar vidare att influencers främst använder återuppbyggande strategier, särskilt ursäkter, ansvarstagande och korrigering åtgärder, samtidigt som dessa kombineras med kontextuella förklaringar och bolstering för att hantera ansvar och skydda varumärkets identitet.

Nyckelord: Varumärkeskommunikation, Kriskommunikation, Cancel kultur, Personliga varumärken, Influencers, Sociala medier.

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1. Introduction

This chapter will provide an overview to the background of cancel culture in relation to influencers personal branding. Furthermore, a research gap is identified, along with the study's potential contribution to the research field. The chapter also addresses the limitations in the study.

1.1 Background

The modern society can increasingly be understood as a crisis society, where the focus lies on identifying, preventing and managing various types of crises (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016). A crisis is defined as a phenomenon in which broken expectations lead to a collective perception of a serious threat, alongside a shared understanding that a crisis is present (Coombs, 2021). Within this context, social media functions as an arena where different perspectives interact and contribute to the organisation of social and collective communities. As a result, influencers are increasingly subject to intensified scrutiny, where individual actions can rapidly generate extensive criticism and public exposure, often referred to as cancel culture (Velasco, 2020).

An example of this is the case of Margaux Dietz, who in November 2022 faced strong criticism after publishing a youtube video showing an intoxicated and seemingly unconscious man outside her apartment (Bratell, 2022). Another example is Matilda Djerf, who in December 2024 became criticized, following an investigation by Aftonbladet, where former employees reported a problematic work environment within her company Djerf Avenue (Bolmgren, 2024). The criticism directed at both influencers, as well as the extensive publicity the cases received on social media, make them relevant for analysing the phenomenon of cancel culture.

Cancel culture can be understood as a social phenomenon in which individuals, organised through social media, collectively express public criticism and moral disapproval of people perceived to have violated social norms and values (Tandoc et al., 2020). Central to this phenomenon is that public exposure is combined with demands for accountability and social justice. Cancellation, in this context, refers to the active practice within cancel culture where individuals or groups respond to perceived norm violations by withdrawing social and economic support (Tandoc et al., 2022).

Research shows that strategic crisis communication is essential for managing crisis situations in relation to the identity of personal brands (Spencer & Kuznekoff, 2025). Crisis communication refers to how actors communicate before, during and after a crisis in order to shape and influence perceptions of the organization or individual (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016). It therefore plays a central role in how information is produced, interpreted and communicated in uncertain and threatening situations, where communication also becomes a key mechanism for integration, coordination and collaboration between relevant actors (Sellnow & Seeger, 2020). Despite its importance, research on crisis communication in relation to cancel culture remains limited (Velasco, 2020), highlighting the need for further studies in this area.

1.2 Problem definition

Previous research on cancel culture in social media indicates a growing focus on defining the often vague concept and the mechanisms through which cancel culture emerges and is enacted. In particular studies highlight how the digital landscape has enabled individuals to increasingly organise through social media to express collective criticism, demand accountability and generate social and economic consequences (Tandoc et al., 2022; Velasco, 2020; Walls et al., 2025). Another prominent focus in research concerns how strategic crisis communication becomes crucial in such situations to protect and rebuild personal brands (Spencer & Kuznekoff, 2025; Gomez-Vasquez et al., 2024). Furthermore research on crisis communication strategies has primarily concentrated on the post-crisis response strategies (Spencer & Kuznekoff, 2025). Research on influencers communications strategies has also provided valuable insights, showing that acknowledgement and apologies generally generate more favorable audience responses than denial (Maligenova & Da Silva, 2026). Along with that, credibility becomes particularly important when influencers face public criticism (Gomez-Vasquez et al., 2024).

Although this study aims to focus on the relationship between influencers and their audience, particularly in explaining how cancel culture emerges, there is a recurring attention in the literature on the maintenance and rebuilding relationships between actors. As a result, cancel culture as a contribution to crisis communication research tends to be underemphasised. At the same time research in cancel culture in relation to crisis communication strategies has increasingly focused on the post-crisis phase rather than the crisis phase itself. This may be due to the fact that research in cancel culture is still relatively

new (Velasco, 2020). This study therefore seeks to address this research gap through a comparative analysis of Matilda Djerf and Margaux Diets as personal brands, in terms of attribution of responsibility, reputational threat and strategic response during a cancellation.

1.3 Aim and Research Question

As previously highlighted, cancel culture has become an increasingly prominent phenomenon within social media and with it, the need for crisis communication responses. This study therefore examines how Swedish influencers personal brands strategically respond to cancellation through crisis communication. Furthermore, the study aims to apply brand communication as a theoretical perspective, in order to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of crisis communication within cancellations. To fulfill the purpose of the study, the following research questions have been formulated:

RQ1: How can influencers be understood as personal brands and how can they become subject to cancel culture?

RQ2: How do influencers use crisis communication in social media to repair their personal brand?

1.4 Relevance to the research field

Crises constitute significant societal events, as they can rapidly transform social and economic structures. From a societal perspective, it is therefore crucial to understand how crises emerge, are managed and interpreted (Sellnow & Seeger, 2020). At the same time, social media has become a central arena for knowledge, culture and public opinion, which has simultaneously increased exposure to public criticism. In this context, cancel culture has emerged as a recurring phenomenon within the digital public sphere (Velasco, 2020). This study is therefore relevant as it, in line with previous research, contributes valuable insights within crisis communication and brand communication. It complements existing research by highlighting the crisis in a digital context and thereby further developing the understanding of how public crises arise, are interpreted and are managed in relation to the research field of brand communication.

1.5 Limitations

The study is grounded in crisis communication and brand communication within the research field of strategic communication. The analysis of how influencers construct their personal brand is limited to the pre crisis phase (*pre crisis*), as well as, the crisis communication to the direct crisis phase (*crisis*). The study adopts a social constructivistic and communicative perspective, where the focus is placed on strategic and intentional communication actions. Furthermore, the theoretical framework is limited to *Personal branding*, *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* and *Image Repair Theory*. This enables a focused analysis of communicative strategies chosen in relation to personal brands during cancellations.

2. Previous research

In the following chapter, an overview of previous research on cancel culture and personal branding is presented, providing a foundation of valuable concepts for the analysis.

2.1 Cancel Culture in Personal Branding

Previous research has studied cancel culture and personal brands by looking at definitions of the phenomena as well as the background to influencers as personal brands and the dynamics of cancel culture. Tandoc et al., in *#CancelCulture. New Media and Society* (2022) aims to develop a more nuanced understanding of cancel culture by examining how users themselves define the phenomenon and which factors motivate participants in cancellation practices. The study concludes that cancel culture can be defined as (1) a social phenomenon in which (2) individuals, organised through social media, (3) collectively express public criticism and moral condemnation of (4) people perceived to have violated social norms and values. Central to cancelling culture is that this public exposure is combined with (5) a desire to hold individuals accountable for their actions and to promote social justice, as well as (6) the production of social and economical consequences (2022). Cancellation in turn is defined as the active practice within cancel culture where individuals or groups respond to perceived norm violations by withdrawing their social support from the targeted person (Tandoc et al., 2022).

Previous research has examined cancel culture in relation to both organisations and personal brands, particularly focusing on what motivates audiences to participate in cancellation processes. Walls et al. (2025) connects, in their study *Cancel Culture in the Digital Age*, the phenomenon to social norms and collective expectations in digital environments. Social media platforms function as arenas where norms are continuously created, reinforced and negotiated through interaction between users. In this way, social media contributes to shaping perceptions of which values and behaviours are considered legitimate, while simultaneously creating pressure for individuals to adapt to these norms (Walls et al., 2025). Walls et al. (2025) further argue that cancellation processes often emerge when audiences perceive that an actor has violated norms that are central to a group's identity or shared values. Such perceived norm violations may trigger collective reactions aimed at enforcing accountability and reaffirming social norms (Walls et al., 2025). Consequently,

audience reactions are not solely based on the actor's objective behaviour, but rather on how that behaviour is interpreted in relation to collective values, expectations and identity.

This understanding is further connected to the changing power dynamics of social media. Tandoc et al. (2022) describe cancellation as a collective effort to hold individuals accountable and demand social justice, illustrating how influence and power increasingly are negotiated between online personas and audiences. Many participants in cancellation processes are motivated by expectations that the criticised individual should acknowledge wrongdoing, apologise or change their behaviour. Cancellation can therefore function as a form of social pressure aimed at eliciting a public response rather than solely excluding the individual permanently. At the same time, cancellation may also involve demands for more direct consequences, such as reduced public influence or direct economical consequences (Tandoc et al., 2022). Cancel culture thereby becomes closely connected to collective attempts to enforce accountability and influence the social position of the individual being criticized.

Research has further tried to explain how cancel culture emerges by linking it to influencers and personal brands, particularly in relation to how personal brands are constructed, negotiated and interpreted in digital environments. Gomez-Vasquez et al. (2024) describes in the study *Personal branding strategies in online hashtag communities: the case of #AcademicTwitter*, personal branding as a process of strategic selfpresentation, where individuals actively attempt to shape audience perception. Social media thus functions as a central arena in which influencers continuously construct and negotiate their identities in interaction with their audience. Similarly, Justice and Bricker (2022) emphasize in the study *They Spoke in Defense of Roy Moore: Networked Apologia and Media Ecosystems* that personal brands are constructed through direct and emotionally driven self-expression, for example via videos, posts and symbolic communication, which creates a sense of closeness and perceived authenticity. However, this authenticity is often strategically constructed rather than entirely spontaneous (2022). Further, Spencer and Kuznekoff (2025) argued in their study *The Try Guys Try Image Repair: Apologia in the Age of Influencers and Digital Media*, that personal brands are not only image constructions but also moral contracts with audiences. Through parasocial relationships, audiences develop strong emotional investments in these brands, making deviations from the established identity particularly consequential. When an individual's actions conflict with these established values, a brand crisis can therefore emerge rapidly, threatening both the individual's reputation and the perceived credibility of the brand as a whole (Spencer & Kuznekoff, 2025). Building on this, Tandoc et

al. (2022) explain that influencers often function as symbolic carriers of norms and values, which results in their actions and statements being closely examined compared to private individuals (Tandoc et al., 2022). Consequently, influencers have reduced control over their narratives, as audiences actively participate in constructing and reshaping their brand identity.

Further Spencer & Kuznekoff (2025) examines how influencers and digital actors manage crises through strategic communication, based on a case study of The Try Guys, following a public scandal. The authors argue that digital influencers occupy a distinct communicative position compared to traditional organisations, as they maintain direct communication with their audiences and build relationships through para-social interactions. As a result, crisis communication in this context tends to require a more personal, transparent and direct approach. Consequently, influencers are expected to act as their own spokespersons and manage crises through their own platforms, which further differentiates them from traditional organisations. The study showed that an effective image repair strategy, in this case, was characterized by clear accountability, a rapid response and concrete actions aligned with audience expectations and values. These elements were found to contribute to the restoration of audience trust (Spencer & Kuznekoff, 2025).

Therefore, previous research highlights that cancel culture in relation to personal brands is closely linked to norm enforcement, audience participation and dynamics in digital environments. However, the literature mainly focuses on how influencers and their audience relationships shape brand construction and how communication strategies affect audience perceptions, often within a post-crisis and Image Repair framework. This study addresses this gap by, building on relevant concepts from previous research, providing a more detailed analysis of crisis communication in cancellations, with a specific focus on how personal brands are managed during the crisis phase.

3. Theoretical framework

In the following chapter, Brand communication in the form of Personal brands, as well as Crisis communication through Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Repair Theory (IRT) will be presented to provide an overview of central perspectives for the study's analysis.

3.1 Brand Communication & Personal Brands

Brands are fundamentally built through communication, as external audiences otherwise would neither become aware of a brand nor form perceptions of them. A brand functions as a carrier of meaning by creating associations among external actors (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018). Branding is no longer limited to products or organisations, but can also be applied to individuals (Adeola et al., 2022). Individuals may therefore function as brands, since people, similarly to organizations, evoke emotional responses and associations among audiences. Personal branding can thus be understood as the strategic construction and communication of an individual's identity in order to influence how they are perceived by others. A personal brand refers to the overall image, values and characteristics associated with an individual, that creates clear and meaningful perceptions among the target audience. Further, through social media and digital communication, the opportunities to build and disseminate a personal brand have become more accessible (Adeola et al., 2022).

Strong personal brands are often characterized by authenticity, consistency, a clear narrative or storytelling and a clear value proposition. Authenticity relates to the perception that the individual is genuine and acts in accordance with the values and promises communicated to the audience. Consistency in communication, behaviour and digital presence relates to repeated and coherent actions and messages, that contributes to recognition and trust. A clear personal narrative and storytelling helps establish emotional connections and strengthens memorability. Effective personal brands also communicate a distinct value proposition by demonstrating what value the individual offers their audience. Consequently, a strong personal brand creates trust, clarity and recognition (Adeola et al., 2022).

In digital environments, personal branding is closely connected to value co-creation, where audiences are not viewed as passive consumers but as active participants in shaping brand value (Ozuem & Willis, 2025). According to research on influencers as personal

brands, co-creation can be understood as the power shift in which value is produced through a dynamic interaction between influencer and audience (Gbadamosi, 2025). Influencers therefore do not merely represent a brand, rather their identity, personality and digital presence constitute a central part of the value communicated to the audiences (Zheng & Speece, 2026). Consequently, the personal brand becomes both a strategic tool for attracting opportunities and building relationships and a socially constructed process, shaped either by the individual or by others through digital presence and external interpretations (Stone, 2025).

3.2 Crisis communication

A crisis is defined as a sudden and unexpected event that risks disrupting normal operations and creates both financial and reputational threats (Coombs, 2007). Such events can affect stakeholders physically, emotionally and economically, increasing the risk of longterm damage to the organisation's brand (Coombs, 2007). Crisis communication is a central part of crisis management and refers to how information is produced, disseminated and interpreted in uncertain and threatening situations (Sellnow & Seeger, 2020). It is essential both for limiting harm during a crisis and for rebuilding trust afterward, as it supports coordination and communication between relevant actors (Coombs, 2007; Sellnow & Seeger, 2020).

A central analytical framework is the three-stage model, which divides a crisis into the pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis phases (Coombs, 2021). In the analysis of crisis communication, the primary focus is on the second phase of the crisis, which begins with a triggering event and further consists of two main processes, Crisis Recognition and Crisis Containment. Crisis recognition involves identifying and acknowledging that a situation constitutes a crisis, both internally and externally. Here, communication becomes a central part for collecting and interpreting information, as well as convincing relevant actors of the severity of the situation. Crisis containment focuses on managing the situation and reducing its negative consequences through actions and communication. At this stage, messages strongly influence how stakeholders perceive the crisis and early communication is often decisive for credibility and reputation. The process also includes ongoing monitoring, adaptation of communication and stakeholder management, where communication functions both as information sharing and as a tool for shaping perceptions and maintaining trust (Coombs, 2021).

3.2.1 Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is grounded in Attribution Theory, which argues that individuals seek explanations for negative and unexpected events by attributing responsibility to different actors. Building on this foundation SCCT explains how stakeholders' perceptions of responsibility shape the reputational threat of a crisis and thereby influence which crisis response strategies are considered appropriate. Central is the assumption that crises differ in how much responsibility stakeholders attribute to the actor involved, based on the crisis type, meaning how the crisis is categorized and interpreted. This assessment is shaped through framing, meaning how the crisis is communicated and interpreted by the media, organisations and audience. The way a crisis is framed further influences how stakeholders understand the causes of the event, who is responsible and how severe the crisis is perceived to be. Based on these attributions, SCCT identifies three crisis clusters associated with different levels of reputational threat (Coombs, 2007).

3.2.1.1 Crisis Clusters

In the victim cluster, the organisation is also perceived as a victim and the responsibility is therefore weak leading to a mild threat to reputation. In the accidental cluster, responsibility is minimal because the crisis is viewed as unintentional, which results in a moderate reputational threat. Finally, in the "Preventable Cluster" the actor is considered to have acted intentionally wrongfully or negligently, for example through human error, rule violations or unethical behavior. These crises result in strong attributions of responsibility and severe reputational threat (Coombs, 2007).

In addition to the crisis type, SCCT highlights two intensifying factors that may strengthen reputational threat: crisis history and prior relational reputation. A history of similar crises or previously poor stakeholder relationships may increase perceptions of responsibility and amplify reputational damage as stakeholders may not interpret the crisis as an isolated event. Consequently, a damaged reputation leads to a decreased willingness to support the organisation or individual, for example by consuming products or services (Coombs, 2007).

3.2.1.2 Crisis response strategies

According to Coombs (2007) crisis response strategies have three objectives related to protecting reputation: (1) shape attributions of the crisis, (2) change perceptions of the organization in crisis and (3) reduce the negative effect generated by the crisis (Coombs,

2007). SCCT is based on the assumption that crisis response strategies must be linked to the level of responsibility attributed to the organization. The level of responsibility, in terms of crisis type, therefore is the key factor linking the crisis situation to the appropriate response. The greater perceived responsibility, the higher the reputational threat the more accommodative the response should be. SCCT categorizes crisis response strategies into three main groups: deny, diminish and rebuild, which reflect increasing levels of accepted responsibility (Coombs, 2007).

Deny strategies are used to disconnect the organization from the crisis. This includes attack the accuser, denial, where the existence of a crisis is rejected and scapegoating, where responsibility is attributed to an external party. The purpose of these strategies is to eliminate perceived organizational involvement in the crisis. Diminish strategies acknowledge that a crisis has occurred but aim to reduce either the organization's responsibility or the perceived severity of the event. These strategies are most effective when they support an interpretation of the crisis as accidental; however, they rely heavily on stakeholder acceptance and credible evidence. Rebuild strategies are applied when the organization is seen as responsible and therefore must restore trust. These include compensation and apology where the organization accepts full responsibility and seeks forgiveness. These strategies are typically required in high-severity crises or situations involving strong attributions of responsibility. In addition, SCCT identifies bolstering strategies, which serve a supportive function alongside the primary responses. Bolstering strategies are primarily used to reinforce goodwill rather than replace primary responses (Coombs, 2007).

Finally, SCCT provides guidelines for matching crisis response strategies to levels of responsibility and situational factors. Low responsibility crises may require only basic information and adjustment, whereas higher responsibility crises call for more accommodative responses such as rebuild strategies (Coombs, 2007).

3.2.2 Image Repair Theory (IRT)

Benoit's Image Repair Theory explains how individuals, organizations or institutions attempt to defend their reputation when they are accused of wrongdoing or criticized, which threaten their reputation. The process can be understood as consisting of two main phases. First, an offensive or undesirable action occurs and is perceived negatively by an audience. Second, the accused person or organization responds by attempting to defend themselves and restore its damaged image through different communicative strategies (Frandsen & Johansen 2016).

Image Repair Theory is based on the assumption that communication is purposeful and directed toward achieving specific objectives. Even though goals may sometimes be unclear or conflicting, rhetoric is generally used strategically in order to influence audiences. One central objective for both individuals and organizations is preserving credibility and favorable reputation. When a person or organization is accused of wrongdoing, whether the accusations are true or only perceived, their reputation may be damaged. This can lead to reduced credibility, loss of trust and negative reactions from others. Consequently, image repair communication becomes necessary in order to restore confidence and minimize harm (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). The theory argues that threats to image consist of two main elements: blame and offensiveness. An accused individual or organization may therefore respond either by denying responsibility, reducing the perceived offensiveness of the act or admitting wrongdoing while attempting to repair the damage (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020).

3.2.2.1 Image Repair Theory Strategies

Benoit identifies five overarching categories of verbal defense strategies that organizations or individuals use in order to restore credibility and protect their reputation during a crisis. Some of these categories are further divided into several substrategies that describe more specific communicative approaches (see table 1) (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016).

The first strategy is denial, which involves rejecting responsibility for the offensive act. Denial can take two different forms. The first is simple denial, where the accused directly states that the event never occurred or that they were not involved in it. The second is shifting the blame, in which responsibility is redirected toward another person or organization that is portrayed as the true cause of the problem (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016).

The second general strategy is evading responsibility. In this case, the accused does not completely deny the event but instead seeks to lessen personal accountability. Benoit presents four variations of this strategy. In the case of provocation, the accused argues that the action was a reaction to external pressure or the behavior of others, thereby suggesting shared responsibility. The second is defeasibility, where the accused claims that the wrongdoing resulted from lack of information, limited knowledge or lack of ability, rather than deliberate intent. The third variation is accident, in which the event is described as unintentional and beyond full control. The fourth is good intentions, where the accused argues that the action was motivated by positive aims despite its negative outcome (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016).

The third major strategy is reducing offensiveness, which focuses on minimizing the negative perception of the act rather than denying it. This can be done in several ways: by

highlighting positive qualities or past actions (bolstering), downplaying the seriousness of the event (minimization), comparing it to worse actions (differentiation) or placing it in a more positive context (transcendence). Additionally attacking the accuser, questions the accuser's credibility while compensation means offering payment or help to those affected (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016).

The fourth strategy is corrective action, which means that the accused tries to solve the problem and prevent similar situations from occurring again, by highlighting practical measures and improvements. Finally, the fifth strategy mortification occurs when the accused openly accepts responsibility for the wrongdoing, apologizes and asks the audience for forgiveness. Mortification represents the most direct acknowledgement of guilt and is often associated with efforts to rebuild trust through honesty and humility (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016). In the analysis, corrective action and mortification will be analysed together. The other strategies will be analyzed under their respective main categories.

Tabel 1: IRT crisis response strategies

The table illustrates the five categories of verbal defense, their tactics and main actions

Strategy	Tactic	Action
Denial	<i>Shift blame</i>	Responsibility is redirected toward another person or organization that is portrayed as the true cause of the problem.
	<i>Simple Denial</i>	The accused directly states that the event never occurred or that they were not involved in it.
Evade responsibility	<i>Defeasibility</i>	The accused claims that the wrongdoing resulted from lack of information, limited knowledge or lack of ability, rather than deliberate intent.
	<i>Accident</i>	The event is described as unintentional and beyond full control.

	<i>Provocation</i>	The accused argues that the action was a reaction to external pressure or the behavior of others.
	<i>Good Intentions</i>	The accused argues that the action was motivated by positive aims despite its negative outcome.
Reducing offensiveness	<i>Bolstering</i>	Highlighting positive qualities or past actions.
	<i>Differentiation</i>	Comparing it to worse actions.
	<i>Minimization</i>	Downplaying the seriousness of the event.
	<i>Transcendens</i>	Placing it in a more positive context.
	<i>Attack accuser</i>	Questions the accuser's credibility.
	<i>Compensation</i>	Offering payment or help to those affected.
Corrective action		The accused tries to solve the problem and prevent similar situations from occurring again, by highlighting practical measures and improvements.
Mortification		The accused openly accepts responsibility for the wrongdoing, apologizes and asks the audience for forgiveness.

These strategies must be applied carefully, as they do not always function effectively in combination. Combining too many strategies may weaken the credibility of the response, particularly when the strategies contradict one another, for example by simultaneously denying responsibility while attempting to minimize the consequences of the act. However,

certain combinations may strengthen the response, such as acknowledging wrongdoing while also communicating corrective actions or promising improvement. Frandsen and Johansen (2020) further emphasise that expressions of regret do not necessarily imply an admission of guilt, highlighting the importance of careful wording in image repair communication. Therefore crisis responses may be ineffective to overcome strong criticism or already established public perceptions. For image repair strategies to be effective, the actor must therefore clearly identify the accusations being addressed, the audience they seek to persuade and the communicative resources available to strengthen the message (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020).

3.3 Theoretical framework - an integrated perspective

In the study, the theory of Personal Brand, Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Image Repair Theory are applied as an integrated analytical framework in order to provide a broader understanding of crisis communication in relation to influencers as personal brands.

The theory of Personal Brands offers a comprehensive framework for analysing how influencers construct their identities, values and audience expectations through communication (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018). This also becomes central for understanding how the cancellation crisis emerged and why the influencers became associated with particular reputational threats. Coombs (2007) SCCT contributes a structured framework for analysing perceived responsibility, reputational threat and crisis cluster, thereby explaining how different crisis situations shape appropriate crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2007). IRT complements this perspective by focusing on how individuals rhetorically manage reputational damage through strategies such as denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, or through mortification and corrective action (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). However, IRT does not provide clear conceptual links between crisis response strategies and elements of the crisis situation. SCCT therefore becomes relevant by explaining how situational factors and responsibility attribution shape the choice of crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2007).

Together, the theories enable an analysis of both how the crises are connected to the influencers' personal brands and how the influencers strategically respond to reputational threats through communication.

4. Method & material

In this chapter the studies research approach, research design, case selection, data collection, selection of empirical material, empirical limitations as well as method of analysis and methodological reflection will be presented. This to give a broader understanding of the methods and materials used to conduct this study.

4.1 Research approach

Since the study aims to provide deeper understanding, within the research fields of Brand communication and Crisis communication, a qualitative research method was considered appropriate. A qualitative method aims to develop a deeper understanding of social phenomena in their natural context, rather than producing generalisable results, thereby distinguishing it from quantitative methods (Halkias et al., 2022). This study was conducted using an abductive research approach, by moving between empirical data and existing theory, in order to identify the most reasonable explanation of the phenomenon (6 & Bellamy, 2012).

Research can further be understood as an interactive process, in which the researcher gradually deepens their understanding of reality. Central to this process are the ontological and epistemological assumptions that shape how reality and knowledge are perceived (Halkias et al., 2022). The study's philosophical foundation was based on a constructivistic, ontological and an interpretivistic, epistemological understanding. A constructivistic ontological perspective does not view social phenomena as objectively given but rather as continuously created and renegotiated through social interaction, making it particularly suitable for studying complex and context dependent phenomena (Bryman, 2016; Halkias et al., 2022). Furthermore, the study is epistemologically grounded in interpretivism with a hermeneutic orientation. From this perspective knowledge is understood as created through interpretation enabling a deeper understanding of individuals social actions and the meanings attached to them (Bryman, 2016). For this study, this means that personal brands and crisis communication are understood as socially constructed phenomena, enabling an analysis of how they are created and renegotiated through social interaction on social media. Furthermore, the hermeneutic orientation contributes to a deeper understanding of the phenomena by interpreting them into a broader social and communicative context, thereby enabling deeper knowledge about the meanings embedded in the communication.

4.2 Research design

The study was conducted as a qualitative case study, focusing on a limited number of cases in order to develop an in-depth understanding of the phenomena studied (Alasuutari et al., 2008). This approach was considered more suitable than other methods, generating generalised knowledge, as it allows for a richer, deeper and more context specific understanding of complex social processes (Eksell & Thelander, 2015). In relation to the study's epistemological foundation, the case study approach aligns with an interpretivist perspective, where social phenomena are understood as socially constructed. Furthermore case studies are characterised by a strong emphasis on contextuality, which influences both the phenomenon itself and the actors involved in it (Alasuutari et al., 2008). This makes the case study approach suitable for examining personal brands and crisis communication as socially constructed phenomena, by considering the complex and reciprocal relationships surrounding them.

4.3 Case selection: Dietz & Djerf

The study is based on the cancellations of Margaux Dietz Matilda Djerf. In November 2022 Margaux Dietz, faced significant public criticism after publishing a YouTube video showing an intoxicated and seemingly unconscious man lying outside her apartment. In the video, she is seen recording the situation and laughing, while her five year old son is present and interacts with the man by touching him. The fact that the situation was filmed, triggered strong reactions across social media (Bratell, 2022). Two years later, in December 2024, an investigation into Matilda Djerf's brand was publicly published by Aftonbladet. The investigation described the workplace as characterized by psychological pressure, bullying and favoritism. Followers and members of the public expressed strong criticism and disappointment (Bolmgren, 2024). The cases represent relevant examples of how influencers' personal brands can become subject to cancel culture and therefore provide an opportunity to analyse how they strategically manage the cancellations through crisis response strategies.

4.4 Data collection and Sampling

The study was based on purposive sampling, where cases were selected according to their relevance to the research questions. More specifically the study has, through critical case sampling, selected cases based on their relevance to test theories and draw logical

conclusions. This allowed for cases capable of providing rich, nuanced and in-depth information about the phenomenon under investigation (Bryman, 2016). Similarly the sample size was determined in relation to the purpose of the study and the ambition to achieve analytical depth, through meaningful and credible knowledge (Bryman, 2016). The size of the empirical material was justified according to the same principles.

Therefore, the sample consists of the two influencers Matilda Djerf and Margaux Dietz, who represent relevant and information-rich cases of how influencers communicate and navigate during cancellation processes in a digital context. The extensive attention surrounding the cases in both traditional and social media made them particularly suitable for collecting empirical material related to personal branding and crisis communication.

The sampling of empirical material was further based on *text-based communication in writing* on social media (Quan-Haase & Sloan, 2022). The selection was motivated by the aim of working with *naturally occurring data*, meaning material produced independently within natural social contexts. Such data is particularly valuable for studying complex social phenomena, as it may reveal patterns and details that otherwise could be overlooked (Alasuutari et al., 2008). Additionally, the communicative environment of social media provides rich and varied content which allows for a qualitative case study and interpretation of social interaction (Quan-Haase & Sloan, 2022). The empirical sample therefore consists of Matilda Djerf and Margaux Dietz responses to the criticism that emerged in connection with their respective cancellations, in the form of text-based posts on Instagram. The material was collected through a manual review of their Instagram accounts, where relevant posts were captured via screenshots.

4.5 Selection of empirical material

The empirical material consists of the two selected influencers' written communication in post, in connection with their respective cancellation crisis, published via their Instagram accounts. Three posts from each influencer, related to their personal brand identity prior to the crisis, were collected in order to examine how their personal brands were constructed before the crisis situation. Furthermore, five crisis related statements from each influencer were collected to analyse their crisis responses during the respective crisis.

Table 3: Empirical material

This table illustrates an overview of the empirical material, describing which influencer each

appendix belongs to, whether the post relates to personal branding or crisis communication and including a brief description of each post.

Post	Dietz/ Djerf	Personal Brand Post/ Crisis Communication Post	Short descriptive text
Appendix: A	Djerf	Personal Brand Post	Expressing gratitude to the Djerf Avenue family.
Appendix: B	Djerf	Personal Brand Post	Affirmations about well being, socially caring and gratefulness.
Appendix: C	Djerf	Personal Brand Post	Gentle reminders to inspire her followers to treat themselves well.
Appendix: D	Dietz	Personal Brand Post	Urges her followers to donate especially to those in need.
Appendix: E	Dietz	Personal Brand Post	Expressing gratitude for good feedback on her social media posts.
Appendix: F	Dietz	Personal Brand Post	Pays tribute and expresses her love for her son.
Appendix: G	Djerf	Crisis Communication Post	Explains her silence on social media and expresses that she thinks it is important to speak directly to her followers.
Appendix: H	Djerf	Crisis Communication Post	Apologises and explains the underlying organizational background to the crisis.
Appendix: I	Djerf	Crisis Communication	Writes about the organizational

		Post	changes that will happen within the company following the crisis.
Appendix: J	Djerf	Crisis Communication Post	Expresses gratitude to her followers, looks ahead and writes about self learning.
Appendix: K	Djerf	Crisis Communication Post	Responds to criticism by apologizing, emphasizing seriousness of the situation and personal development.
Appendix: L	Dietz	Crisis Communication Post	Apologizes and explains the sequence of events surrounding the incident.
Appendix: M	Dietz	Crisis Communication Post	Emphasizes that her way of acting was wrong.
Appendix: N	Dietz	Crisis Communication Post	Explains the underlying factors behind her actions.
Appendix: O	Dietz	Crisis Communication Post	Apologizes and responds to criticism on her story.
Appendix: P	Dietz	Crisis Communication Post	Promotes her SVT documentary that depicts the event and emphasizes personal development.

The purpose of the table is to facilitate a clearer understanding of the appendices used in the analysis and to provide a more structured analytical framework for referencing them.

4.5.2 Empirical limitations

The empirical material is limited to *text based communication in writing*, that allows for the analysis of extant already published material, which contributes to a more reflective and

in-depth analytical process (Quan-Haase & Sloan, 2022). Furthermore, the study is limited to empirical material collected exclusively from Instagram. Instagram is widely used for communication with broad audiences, dissemination of messages and response to public criticism. As such, the platform also functions as an arena for personal branding and crisis communication, making it particularly suitable for analysing influencer's public statements in relation to the phenomena (Bergström, 2021). In addition, the material is limited to statements related to one specific cancellation per influencer, which means that the concept of crisis history and prior relational reputation within SCCT are not included in the analysis. Finally, the study does not include audience comments or reactions, which limits the possibility of addressing the effects or perception of the crisis response strategies.

4.4 Method of analysis

Since the study aims to develop a deeper understanding of experiences and expressions, thematic analysis was considered an appropriate method of analysis. Thematic analysis involves identifying recurring themes in the data that are relevant to the research questions, enabling the researcher to interpret patterns and develop deeper understanding of the material (Bryman, 2016).

The analysis was conducted in accordance with the steps of thematic analysis as presented by Bryman (2016), which form the foundation of a generic approach to qualitative data analysis (see table 2). Bryman's (2016) framework of a thematic analysis combines flexibility with a structured analytical process, where continuous coding, categorisation and reassessment contribute to the development of themes that both describe and interpret data (2016). In the final stage, the identified themes were used to generate theoretical interpretations, thereby contributing to the development of knowledge within the field.

In line with Eksell and Thelander (2015), the analysis followed an abductive approach, combining deductive theory driven coding with inductive category development from the empirical material (2015). Both preestablished theories guided initial categories while new categories were generated from the empirical material itself.

To ensure analytical clarity, the first research question was divided into two subquestions: "How do influencers use social media to build their personal brands?" and "How can personal brands be subject to cancel culture?". In this part of the analysis, the empirical material was interpreted through themes related to key elements of strong personal brands, value-co creation and concepts from cancel culture research. The second research

question, the themes were based on the main categories of crisis response strategies within both SCCT and IRT. Overall, the theoretical frameworks were applied iteratively, with continuous comparison between theory and empirical material to develop a coherent analytical understanding.

4.5 Methodological Reflections and Ethical Considerations

The quality of the study is guided through Eksell & Thelander's (2015) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (2015). Credibility is strengthened through the use of extant data, meaning already published material, independent of the researcher's own production. Transferability is supported by contextual descriptions of the empirical material. Further, dependability is ensured through a transparent and systematic description of the research process, while confirmability is achieved by grounding all interpretations in the empirical data.

The use of thematic analysis further contributes to transparency, as the process of coding, categorisation and interpretation is systematically documented (Bryman, 2016). However, ethical considerations regarding the analysis are guided by the principles of Diener and Crandoll (1978), with particular focus on potential harm to participants, informed consent, privacy and deception (Bryman, 2016). The study is based on publicly available Instagram posts from public influencers and does not involve any direct interaction with participants. However, ethical issues remain relevant in digital contexts where the boundary between public and private content is not always clear. To reduce potential harm, all quoted material is carefully contextualised. Since the material consists of content published by the influencers themselves, issues related to consent and privacy are limited. No deception has been used, as the study relies solely on publicly available data. Overall, the study recognises the importance of ethical reflection when using social media data, particularly in relation to the balance between public accessibility and individual integrity.

The study also demonstrates reflexive awareness regarding the researcher's role in the analytical process. As the empirical material is interpreted rather than objectively measured, the analysis is influenced by the researcher's theoretical framework, methodological choices and prior understanding of concepts such as personal branding and cancel culture. While thematic analysis provides a structured approach to coding and interpretation, alternative readings of the material remain possible. This means that the findings should be understood

as one of several possible interpretations of the data, rather than a definitive representation of reality.

5. Analysis & Result

In this chapter, a thematic analysis will be conducted on the selected empirical material. using a theoretical framework consisting of: Personal branding, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), crisis clusters and Image Repair Theory (IRT).

5.1 How can influencers be understood as personal brands and how can they become subject to cancel culture?

The following subchapters analyse how Djerf and Dietz construct and communicate their personal brands through social media interactions. The analysis further examines how these communicated identities become challenged in relation to the crisis events and cancellation processes. Finally, the chapter applies Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) to analyse how the crises can be understood in terms of crisis responsibility, reputational threat and crisis clusters.

5.1.1 How do influencers use social media to build their personal brands?

The concept of a personal brand can be defined as an identity that creates clear and meaningful perceptions among the target audience, regarding an individual's values and characteristics (Adeola et al., 2022). Brands are fundamentally built through communication, since external actors otherwise would neither become aware of a brand nor form any perceptions of them (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018). This can be understood as the concept of personal branding, a strategic creation and communication of a clear identity that influences others perspectives on the individual. Through social media and digital communication, the opportunities to build and disseminate a personal brand have become more accessible (Adeola et al., 2022). According to Zheng and Speece (2026) influencers do not only represent a brand, rather their personal identity and digital presence constitute a central part of the value being communicated to the audience (2026). The way Djerf and Dietz communicate with their audience therefore becomes central to understanding how their personal brand is constructed.

On Instagram Djerf repeatedly post gentle reminders and word of affirmations:

Hi cuties, I thought we could hold each other accountable today. Throughout the day let's make sure we.. - set aside at least 5 minutes to just sit and breathe. Breathe in.. breathe out.. breathe in.. breathe out... - Write down 3 things you are grateful for, 3 things that make you happy, 3 things that make you feel good. - Check in on someone. Send a message/call and just let them know you appreciate them. And a gentle reminder: you're enough just the way you are. (see appendix B).

What becomes evident is how Djerf constructs a sense of sincerity by repeatedly communicating values in line with emotional openness and supportiveness. This is further reinforced in her “Gentle reminders” post, where she states: “To be the strongest version of myself I need to be gentle with myself (...) I need to remind myself that I am doing my best and that my best will look different every single day” (see appendix C). The recurrence of vulnerability and self-reflection strengthens the perception of genuineness, as the same values are continuously expressed across contexts. Adeola et al. (2022), argues that an effective brand consists of several key elements, one of which concerns authenticity, that is achieved when communicated values are constantly enacted, reinforcing genuineness (2022).

Similarly, Dietz constructs authenticity through intimate and relational communication, for example: “Hi and thank you for saying that the new video is among my best ❤️ it feels good to be able to open up and talk with you ❤️” (see appendix E) and

My sunshine in life, I'm so happy it was you who came into this world five years ago. Not a single day goes by without you showing me what happiness is and what life is really about. It's amazing how someone so small can spread so much joy and love. I can't even imagine where life will take you but I know you'll be able to do anything ❤️ Thank you for letting me be your mom 💕 I love you more than words can ever express 🥰 (see appendix F).

Both statements from Dietz demonstrate emotional openness and personal self-disclosure. By sharing emotionally charged reflections and private aspects of her family life, her communication appears personal and genuine, strengthening the perception that her personal identity reflects her lived experiences and personal values.

The quotations presented above from both Dietz and Djerf reflect characteristics associated with what Adeola et al. refer to as authenticity, meaning that the individual is perceived as genuine and consistent in their behavior (2022). Spencer & Kuznekoff (2025) additionally explains that personal brands are often built on values such as authenticity where emotional self-expression makes the personal identity a central part of the brand (2025).

Furthermore, themes of emotional openness and intimacy recur throughout their Instagram communication. The repeated expression of similar values and messages across different posts contributes to a coherent brand identity, which aligns with Adeola et al.'s (2022) concept of consistency. Additionally, consistency in communication, visual expression and social media presence contributes to recognition and trust among the audience (Adeola et al., 2022).

Based on the previous analysis, recurring themes in Djerf's communication include emotional support, selfcare and inclusivity: "Hi cuties, I thought we could hold each other accountable today (...)" (appendix A) and "I need to remind myself that I am doing my best and that my best will look different every single day" (appendix C). Whereas Dietz's communication is characterized by emotional openness, intimacy and family oriented storytelling: "❤️ Thank you for letting me be your mom 💕 I love you more than words can ever express 😊" (see appendix F) and "(...) it feels good to be able to open up and talk with you ❤️" (see appendix E). Djerf and Dietz's storytelling contributes to constructing emotionally engaging narratives around the influencers' identities, where followers are invited into personal reflections, relationships and experiences. Adeola et al (2022) highlights the importance of a clear narrative or story as it helps the audience form an emotional connection with the individual and makes the brand more memorable.

Dietz's communication reveals further findings:

Everyone can do something to help 🟡💙 you too! On Monday the buses will depart for Poland to @ademandforaction and if you have anything spare at home that's listed in this post please stop by and leave it according to the instructions. What's most urgently needed right now is food. 💙 Hope to see you on Monday at 10:00 AM at Karlaplan. Look for @ekmanbuss_flexibussar and you'll find us! ❤️ (Appendix D).

This post shows how Dietz encourages her audience to take part in a collective effort by directly inviting them to contribute and get socially involved. Adeola et al (2022) highlights that effective personal brands communicate a clear value proposition by showing what value

the individual offers to their audience (2022). In addition to the previously identified values of emotional openness, intimacy and family oriented storytelling, the quotation above suggests added value in the form of emotional involvement and social engagement in a shared cause. She also demonstrates that her personal branding extends beyond commercial objectives, as it reflects a broader emphasis on social responsibility and engagement.

In the case of Djerf, her value proposition consists of emotional support: “And a gentle reminder: you’re enough just the way you are.” (Appendix A). Other than that, further statements highlight values in the form of inclusivity and collective belonging:

And my djerf Avenue family, thank you!! Your hard work doesn’t go unnoticed and I appreciate you so incredibly much. To be able to say we did this together is such a special feeling ❤️ (Appendix B).

Here, the use of collective framing blurs the boundaries between different actors, creating an expanded sense of community.

How Djerf and Dietz build their personal brands can further be explained by what Gomez-Vasques et al. (2024) describe as direct and emotional self-expression (2024). Social media simultaneously functions as a central arena where the influencers continuously construct and negotiate their identities in front of an audience where they actively seek to shape audience perceptions (Gomez-Vasques et al., 2024). Through personal videos, posts or symbols they strategically construct a sense of closeness and perceived authenticity (Justice & Bricker, 2022). Based on the patterns identified in Djerf’s and Dietz’s communication, their personal branding appears to align with the key elements of a strong and credible identity, namely authenticity, consistency, storytelling and a defined value proposition (Adeola et al., 2022). In line with Adeola et al. (2022), this suggests that Djerf and Dietz, through strategic communication, create trust, clarity and recognition, where their personal brands become the overall image and set of values associated with them (2022).

However, it’s in this context important to consider the concept of *value co-creation*. Users of digital platforms are no longer seen as passive consumers but as active co-creators of value (Ozuem & Willis, 2025). Value is created through the dynamic interaction between influencer and audience (Gbadamosi, 2025) and is continuously shaped through ongoing audience engagement and social interaction (Gomez-Vasques et al., 2024).

In line with Stone (2025), this implies that the personal brands of Djerf and Dietz function both as strategic tools and as continuously evolving constructs. They are used to attract

opportunities and build relationships, while at the same time being continuously shaped and redefined through external perceptions and digital interactions (2025). The concept of value co-creation will further be useful in (5.1.2), as it can contribute to an understanding of how the cancellation emerged.

5.1.2 How can personal brands be subject to cancel culture?

A crisis is defined as a sudden and unexpected event that risks disrupting operations and simultaneously poses both financial and reputational threats (Coombs, 2007). Coombs (2021) further highlights that a crisis begins with a triggering event (2021).

In December 2024 the Swedish newspaper Aftonbladet published an investigation into the working conditions within Matilda Djerf's company Djerf Avenue. The triggering event was not a single action but rather the publication of consistent testimonies from former employees. These testimonies described a work environment characterised by psychological pressure, bullying and perceived favoritism. The publication acted as a catalyst that exposed internal problems and made them accessible to the public (Bolmgren, 2024). The crisis surrounding Margaux Dietz emerged in November 2022 following the publication of a video on her Youtube channel showing an intoxicated and seemingly unconscious man outside her residence. The triggering factor was not solely the incident itself, but also the decision to record, edit and publish the material for a wide audience. The video's tone, which portrayed the situation in a humorous manner while her minor son interacted with the man, further intensified public criticism. The combination of a perceived violation of privacy, lack of consent and deficient ethical judgement led to a rapid and widespread backlash across social media (Bratell, 2022).

A crisis consists of two key subprocesses: Crisis recognition and Crisis containment. Crisis recognition involves identifying and acknowledging that a situation constitutes a crisis. Communication plays a crucial role in the context of crisis containment, particularly in defining and accepting an event as a crisis. This process involves collecting, interpreting and conveying information, as well as convincing relevant actors of the severity of the situation (Coombs, 2021). Both Dietz and Djerf waited several days before publicly addressing the event: "The past few days I've received harsh criticism for a video I posted last week" (Appendix L, Dietz) and: "Over the past few days, I've been quiet on social media." (Appendix G, Djerf). This delayed response, in combination with other factors, may have intensified the backlash as Zheng & Speece (2026) explains that influencers operate within a

media environment characterized by realtime interactions, rapid information dissemination and low control, which creates significant demands on crisis management (2026).

The previous part of the analysis showed how Djerfs and Dietz through strategic, emotional self-expression built their personal brand. Djerf's personal brand was highly associated with values in the form of emotional support, inclusivity and belonging. Dietz's personal brand communicated values in line with emotional openness, intimacy, family oriented storytelling, emotional involvement and social responsibility (see 5.1.1). Another valuable insight was that their value was co-created through dynamic interaction between influencer and audience and continuously shaped through ongoing audience engagement and social interaction (Gbadamosi, 2025; Gomez-Vasques et al., 2024).

When Dietz actions became publicly criticised, they were framed as involving violations of privacy, lack of consent and deficient ethical judgement (Expressen, 2022). This unethical behavior conflicted with the values previously communicated through personal branding, which particularly had been constructed around emotional presence and social responsibility (see 5.1.1). Arguably, the strong emphasis on intimacy within Dietz's communication may also have contributed to a blurred boundary between private and public spheres, where sharing personal and emotionally charged situations became normalised within her personal branding. However, her statements following the incident indicate that Dietz later recognised the behaviour as inappropriate and unethical:

I understand that many people have reacted to an incident in my recent video where I among other things came across as insensitive. It has caused anger, frustration and disappointment among many of you. It is not okay to exploit people who are in vulnerable situations nor is it okay to expose your children to potential danger by allowing them to be present in an unsafe situation the way I allowed my son to be. (Appendix O).

In the case of Djerf, the values communicated through her personal branding, particularly inclusivity, emotional support and collective belonging, became challenged when reports describing psychological pressure, bullying and perceived favoritism within Djerf Avenue emerged publicly. The contrast became particularly visible when Djerf herself distanced her identity from the accusations, stating: "I don't recognize myself in all the claims made, but I see this as an opportunity to listen, grow, and take full responsibility as a leader." (Appendix K). Also when she simultaneously continued to emphasize values such as

inclusion in her statements, during the crisis: “Inclusion is one of my core values and the foundation of everything I've built with Djerf Avenue.” (Appendix K).

Consequently this led to, when the actions of Djerf and Dietz became publicly criticised, that the co-created values surrounding their identity were disrupted. Spencer and Kuznekoff (2025) explains that personal brands not only are image constructions but also moral contracts with the audience. Audiences develop parasocial relationships and invest emotionally in these brands, making deviations from the established identity and values particularly consequential (2025).

Walls et al., (2025) explains that digital environments function as arenas for the creation and negotiation of social norms. Interactions on social media contribute to defining which values are perceived as legitimate, while simultaneously pressuring individuals to conform to these norms (2025). At the same time, influencers often function as symbolic representatives of broader societal values, which means that their actions and statements are subjected to a greater extent than those of private individuals (Tandoc et al., 2022). Arguably, the public criticism against Djerf and Dietz can be understood as intensifying when their behaviour was perceived to violate norms connected to acceptable conduct and the values associated with their personal brands. Furthermore, Walls et al. (2025) argue that cancellation processes become particularly strong when individuals are perceived to violate norms that are central to a group's shared identity (2025). Consequently the reactions toward Djerf and Dietz were shaped not only by the actions themselves, but also how these actions were interpreted in relation to societal norms, collective expectations and identity.

Before the crisis Djerf and Dietz could be argued as strong personal brands, as their communication appeared to align with Adeola et al's (2022) concepts of authenticity, consistency, storytelling and a clear value proposition (see 5.1.1). Previous analysis demonstrated how a contrast emerged between their value proposition and the behaviour associated with the crisis events. Similarly, the elements of authenticity and consistency became disrupted as Djerf and Dietz no longer were perceived as genuine and consistent in relation to the promises, values and identity communicated to the audience (Adeola et al., 2022). At the same time, consistency was weakened, as strong personal brands rely on coherent values, behaviour and communication over time (Adeola et al., 2022).

This ultimately positioned both Djerf and Dietz as subjects of cancel culture in accordance with Tandoc et al.'s (2022) criteria: individuals, organised through social media, collectively express public criticism and moral condemnation of people perceived to have violated social norms and values (2022). Additionally the public exposure is combined with a

desire to hold individuals accountable for their actions and to promote social justice, as well as a desire for social and economical consequences (Tandoc et al., 2022). When an influencer becomes subject to criticism, the consequences extend beyond the specific incident itself and affect the overall identity of the personal brand (Zheng & Speece, 2026). In the cases of Djerf and Dietz, the cancellation processes therefore threatened not only their individual reputations, but also the credibility and values connected to their personal brands.

5.1.3 Personal Brands in the context of Crisis Clusters

Coombs (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory is based on the assumption that stakeholders' perceptions of responsibility shape the reputational threat of a crisis and thereby influence which crisis response strategies are considered appropriate. The crisis type, meaning how the crisis is categorized and interpreted, is shaped through framing, thereby how the crisis is communicated and interpreted by the media, organisations and audience (2007).

In media coverage, the crisis surrounding Djerf was framed as an organisational and leadership related issue, where repeated testimonies described a workplace characterised by psychological pressure, bullying and perceived favouritism (Expressen, 2024). The framing therefore positioned the crisis as connected to structural and long term problems within Djerf Avenue rather than as an isolated incident, increasing attributions of responsibility. The crisis surrounding Dietz, on the other hand, was framed more directly around ethical judgement and individual responsibility. Media coverage emphasised the publication of a video showing an intoxicated and seemingly unconscious man, where the criticism centered on issues of privacy and the decision to present the situation in a humorous manner online (Expressen, 2022). Additionally, previous analysis showed that Dietz and Djerf violated norms connected to acceptable conduct and deviations from moral contracts with the audience (see 5.1.2).

When it comes to the actor's own communication during the state of crisis recognition, statements such as Djerf's "I failed to be the leader and colleague I wish to be along the way." (Appendix H) and Dietz's "I have a responsibility toward my fellow human beings, my followers and my partners. I failed in that responsibility." (Appendix L) further increased the perception of responsibility in both crises. Although Djerf partly distances herself from aspects of the accusations by stating "I don't recognize myself in all the claims made, but I see this as an opportunity to listen, grow, and take full responsibility as a leader." (Appendix K), she still acknowledges responsibility. Similarly, Dietz attempted to challenge parts of the media by arguing that "I want to clarify that I would have acted differently if the

man had been in distress, or unconscious as many media outlets have incorrectly reported” (Appendix N). However, despite these attempts to contextualise or partly distance themselves from the criticism, the overall perception of responsibility within both cases remains, as the influencers acted in ways that audiences perceived as unethical and inconsistent with social expectations.

The way a crisis is framed further influences how stakeholders understand the causes of the event, who is responsible and how severe the crisis is perceived to be. Based on these attributions, SCCT identifies three crisis clusters associated with different levels of reputational threat (Coombs, 2007). Based on media and their own communication, both Djerf and Dietz can be understood within what Coombs (2007) refers to as the “preventable cluster”. Crisis within this cluster are characterized by high attributions of responsibility, as stakeholders perceive that the actor has violated social expectations, ethical norms or acted negligently. Consequently, such crises involve a severe level of reputational threat, which often leads to a decreased willingness among stakeholders to support the organisation or individual (Coombs, 2007). This becomes particularly visible in the context of a cancellation, where the public exposure is combined with attempts to hold individuals accountable for their actions, promote social justice and generate social as well as economic consequences for the person involved (Tandoc et al., 2022).

In addition to the crisis type, SCCT highlights two intensifying factors that may strengthen reputational threat: crisis history and prior relational reputation. A history of similar crises or previously poor stakeholder relationships may increase perceptions of responsibility and amplify reputational damage as stakeholders may not interpret the crisis as an isolated event (Coombs, 2007). However, since this study is limited to empirical material for one specific crisis for each influencer, crisis history and prior relational reputation fall outside the main purpose of the analysis, despite their relevance within SCCT. Nevertheless, the analysis of crisis clusters remains important for the following section of the analysis, as SCCT is based on the assumption that crisis response strategies must be adapted to the level of perceived responsibility associated with the crisis (Coombs, 2007).

5.2 How do influencers use crisis communication in social media to repair their personal brand?

While the previous chapter (5.1) focused on crisis recognition, this chapter examines crisis containment, namely the communicative responses and actions aimed at limiting the

consequences of the crisis (Coombs, 2021). The chapter analyses how Djerf and Dietz use crisis communication to repair their personal brands in relation to high levels of attributed responsibility and reputational threat. To do so, the analysis applies Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Repair Theory (IRT) to examine how different crisis response and image repair strategies are used to restore trust and audience relationships.

5.2.1 SCCT crisis response strategies

At this stage, both Dietz and Djerf remain in the crisis phase, where communication plays a central role in shaping credibility and reputation (Coombs, 2021). This phase involves continuous monitoring, adaptation of messages and management of stakeholder relationships, making communication important for providing information and maintaining trust (Coombs, 2021). Within SCCT, the relationship between the crisis situation and the chosen response strategy is central. The theory argues that crisis responses should be adapted to the level of responsibility attributed to the individual or organization (Coombs, 2007).

Based on previous analysis, both Djerf and Dietz can be understood within the preventable crisis cluster characterized by high responsibility attribution and severe reputational threat (see 5.1.3). Since crises within the preventable crisis cluster are attributed higher responsibility, these crises call for more accommodative responses such as rebuild strategies. Rebuild strategies are applied when the organization is seen as responsible and therefore must restore trust. These include compensation and apology where the organization accepts full responsibility and seeks forgiveness (Coombs, 2007).

Djerf's response immediately establishes a rebuild strategies through emotionally direct statements such as: "To anyone I've hurt or let down, I want to start off by saying that I'm genuinely sorry." (See appendix H) and later: "I failed to be the leader and colleague I wish to be along the way. And for that I am so, so sorry." (See appendix H). These statements show how Djerf openly acknowledges harm and offering a direct apology. She further reinforces this rebuild strategy when sharing:

Moving forward, I'm committed and want to focus my all on becoming the best leader and colleague I can be. I'll keep learning and working to ensure Djerf Avenue is a safe, inclusive space for everyone. (See appendix J)

These statements focus on future improvement and direct apologies, which according to Coombs (2007), is central in the high responsibility crisis, to restore relationships with stakeholders and reduce reputational damage (2007).

Dietz also primarily relies on rebuild strategies. This is especially visible when she states: “I understand the criticism, I take it to heart and I want to offer my sincere, unconditional apology.” and “To all my fellow human beings, followers and collaborators I have a responsibility. I have failed in that responsibility” (see appendix L). These statements clearly acknowledge responsibility and apologies directly to stakeholders, which again aligns with rebuild strategies in SCCT (Coombs, 2007). She continues this rebuild strategy by explicitly acknowledging several mistakes: “It was wrong to film the incident. It was wrong to upload it on Youtube. It was wrong to involve my son. And it was wrong to not immediately call the police.” (See appendix M). This repeated structure reinforces accountability and responsibility, which are central aspects of rebuild strategies in high-severity crises (Coombs, 2007).

At the same time Dietz combines rebuild strategies with diminish strategies, which aims to reduce either responsibility or the perceived severity of the event, by explaining the circumstances surrounding the situation (Coombs, 2007). This becomes visible in statements such as: “I am told by my colleague in the stairwell that he resembles a family friend, and I incorrectly assume that this is the case.” (See appendix L) and:

I want to make it clear that I would have acted differently if the man had been in distress, or unconscious, as many media outlets have incorrectly reported. Since he was responsive I was able to assess that he was not in danger and did not pose any danger to us. That assessment was correct and the police reached the same conclusion as soon as they arrived.” (See appendix N).

These explanations attempt to reduce perceptions of negligence or harmful intent by clarifying how the situation was interpreted at the same time. On the other hand, Dietz is reinforcing rebuild strategies in the same context: “There are no mitigating circumstances” (See appendix M). This statement is important because it emphasizes responsibility despite the contextual explanations.

Similar diminish strategies is visible in Djerf’s crisis response where responsibility is partially mitigated through contextualization:

I wasn't ready. I had never led a team prior to this, I had never built a company prior to this, and under a lot of stress, high tempo and naivety I failed to be the leader and colleague I wish to be along the way. (Appendix H).

Through these explanations, Djerf attempts to reduce perceptions of control and intentional wrongdoing by emphasizing stress, inexperience and naivety, which corresponds with the objective of diminish strategies (Coombs, 2007). Similarly, when she states: “I don't recognize myself in all the claims made, but I see this as an opportunity to listen, grow, and take full responsibility as a leader.” (See appendix K). The first part of the statement creates some distance between herself and the accusations, which resembles aspects of diminish or denial strategies, while the second part simultaneously reinforces rebuilding through responsibility taking.

Additionally, Djerf uses bolstering strategies which aim to strengthen the actor's position by reminding audiences of previous values or actions, rather than replace primary responses (Coombs, 2007). This becomes visible in statements such as, “Creating a safe, inclusive, and respectful space has always been essential to me, both personally and as the founder of Djerf Avenue.” (See appendix K) and:

Inclusion is one of my core values and the foundation of everything I've built with Djerf Avenue. I deeply value everyone who represents us and am committed to ensuring they always feel appreciated, included and supported. (See appendix K).

Djerf attempts to strengthen her image by emphasizing positive values connected to her identity and brand. Similarly, when it comes to Dietz, the use of bolstering strategies becomes visible:

I will leave the comment section open and I understand those of you who are angry or upset. But I would like to ask you to keep the discussion as free from personal attacks as possible. (See appendix M).

Dietz expresses understanding toward stakeholder reactions while simultaneously positioning herself as someone negatively affected by the hostility surrounding the crisis. Bolstering is also visible when she states: “It pains me that many people believe I put someone's life and health at risk.” (See appendix N). This statement emphasizes her emotional reaction to the

criticism and positions her as personally affected by the public interpretation of the incident. Both quotations resemble bolstering because the communication attempts to humanise the influencer and minimise reputational damage by framing the situation as emotionally difficult for everyone involved (Coombs, 2007).

Overall, both Djerf and Dietz primarily rely on rebuild strategies through apology, responsibility-taking, and corrective action, while also incorporating diminish strategies by contextualizing their behaviour. However, their use of bolstering strategies differs. Djerf emphasizes values such as inclusion, safety, and respect in order to reconnect the crisis response to the identity of her brand, whereas Dietz applies bolstering more personally by highlighting the emotional impact the criticism has had on her. What also becomes particularly evident in Dietz's communication is the recurring and consistent use of rebuild throughout almost every part of the response, arguably to a greater extent than in Djerf's communication:

I take on your comments both here and in the media. Sorry. I have removed the video and look forward to creating better and more thoughtful content going forward. (See appendix O).

Through repeated apologies, acknowledgement of criticism, and emphasis on corrective action, Dietz's communication remains consistently focused on rebuilding trust and repairing stakeholder relationships, which aligns closely with rebuild strategies (Coombs, 2007). Although rebuild strategies are also dominant in Djerf's communication, her response more frequently combines rebuild with diminish and bolstering strategies, through contextual explanations and value-based self-positioning. As a result, Dietz maintains a more consistently responsibility-oriented response.

The analysis of Djerf's and Dietz's reflects how they through communication tries to reach the three objectives related to protecting reputation within SCCT: (1) shape attributions of the crisis, (2) change perceptions of the organization in crisis and (3) reduce the negative effect generated by the crisis (Coombs, 2007).

5.2.2 Image Repair Strategies

Image Repair Theory (IRT) conceptualises image as a central component of social interaction, where criticism and public accusations trigger strategic efforts to repair reputation

through communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016). The theory therefore is particularly relevant for analysing Djerf's and Dietz's statements in relation to public criticism and cancellation dynamics.

While the previous SCCT-based analysis focused on reputational threat (see 5.2.1), IRT allows for a more detailed analysis of communication as strategically used to protect and restore reputation. At a micro-analytical level, the theory makes it possible to identify communicative patterns that are less visible within the broader SCCT framework.

IRT argues that threats to image consist of two main elements: blame and offensiveness. An accused individual or organization may therefore respond either by denying responsibility, reducing the perceived offensiveness of the act or admitting wrongdoing while attempting to repair the damage (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). To ensure analytical clarity, the following comparison is structured according to IRT's five main strategies: Denial, Evading responsibility, Reducing offensiveness, Corrective action and Mortification (see table 1).

5.2.2.1 Denial strategies

According to IRT, denial strategies, involves rejecting responsibility for the act, either by denying that it occurred or by shifting blame to another person or organization (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016). Neither Dietz or Djerf does engage in direct denial or shift blame to another actor. However elements of denial become visible when Dietz questions how the event has been publicly interpreted: "The video is not edited chronologically. That creates room for several questions and misunderstandings." (See appendix O). Here, Dietz partly distances herself from the public framing of the incident by suggesting that the edited video and media descriptions created misunderstandings.

Djerf also avoids direct denial, but partial distancing becomes visible in statements such as: "I don't recognize myself in all the claims made (...)" (see appendix K). This creates a rhetorical distance between Djerf's self image and the accusations. At the same time, she avoids fully rejecting the allegations since the statement is immediately followed by "(...) but I see this as an opportunity to listen, grow, and take full responsibility as a leader." (See appendix K). Therefore these statements align more closely with what Frandsen and Johansen (2016) describe as strategies aimed at evading responsibility or reducing offensiveness.

5.2.2.2 Evading responsibility strategies

Further, evading responsibility strategies include defeasibility and accident framing, where actors reduce perceived responsibility by referring to lack of information, stress, external circumstances or unintended outcomes (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016). Dietz repeatedly uses defeasibility through contextual explanations:

I am told by my colleague in the stairwell that he resembles a family friend, and I incorrectly assume that this is the case. Therefore my son is standing next to me when I open the door, which he should not have been. As soon as I check on the man I call a friend to ask for advice, should I call the police or an ambulance? I do not want to call 112 as they are already overwhelmed with unnecessary calls. (See appendix L).

These statements reduce perceived responsibility by emphasizing uncertainty, limited information and situational judgement. Through references to the circumstances surrounding the event Dietz therefore manages to evade responsibility (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016). Djerf similarly relies on defeasibility by contextualising her behaviour through inexperience and stress:

I wasn't ready. I had never led a team prior to this, I had never built a company prior to this, and under a lot of stress, high tempo and naivety I failed to be the leader and colleague I wish to be along the way. (See appendix H).

These statements reduce perceived responsibility by presenting leadership failures as consequences of rapid growth, stress and lack of preparedness rather than malicious intent. Djerf further reinforces this framing when writing: “I wish my growth happened faster (...)” (see appendix H) which positions the crisis as connected to personal and professional development rather than deliberate misconduct. Compared to Dietz, Djerf’s evading responsibility strategies are more strongly connected to organizational pressure and leadership inexperience, whereas Dietz’s explanations focus more on situational interpretation and lack of information in the specific incident. However, evading responsibility strategies related to accident and provocation are largely absent, as neither Djerf nor Dietz explicitly frame the incident as accidental nor attempt to evoke negative emotions in order to reduce responsibility (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016).

5.2.2.3 Reducing offensiveness strategies

This category includes bolstering, differentiation, transcendence and attack accuser, all aimed at reducing the perceived offensiveness of the act (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016). Bolstering is particularly prominent in Djerf's communication. She repeatedly reinforces positive values associated with herself and the brand: "Creating a safe, inclusive, and respectful space has always been essential to me, both personally and as the founder of Djerf Avenue." and

Inclusion is one of my core values and the foundation of everything I've built with Djerf Avenue. I deeply value everyone who represents us and am committed to ensuring they always feel appreciated, included and supported. (See appendix K).

These statements function as bolstering because they emphasize positive personal qualities and moral values in order to counteract reputational damage (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016). Dietz also uses bolstering, although in a more emotional and interpersonal way:

It pains me that many people believe I endangered someone's life and health. I later reached out to the person in question and apologised as I hoped I hadn't frightened him by calling the police. (See appendix N).

Such statements humanise Dietz and emphasize empathy, openness and emotional accountability. Rather than reinforcing organizational values, Dietz's bolstering primarily focuses on emotional sincerity and relational transparency. The previous quote can further be applied in the context of differentiation and transcendence along with: "I want to make it clear that I would have acted differently if the man had been in distress (...)" (See appendix N). By distinguishing the situation from more severe interpretations and highlighting the context surrounding the man, Dietz attempts to reposition the incident within a less harmful context while simultaneously framing her actions within a broader moral narrative of concern and responsibility. According to Frandsen and Johansen (2016) such strategies reduce the perceived severity or offensiveness of the act (2016). Reducing offensiveness is also visible in the form of, attack the accuser: "(...) "as many other media outlets have incorrectly reported." (See appendix N) where Dietz questions the credibility of the criticism by questioning parts of the media narrative surrounding the event (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016).

Djerf uses transcendence more strongly than differentiation by framing the crisis as part of broader growth and leadership development:

I see this as an opportunity to listen, grow, and take full responsibility as a leader. I am committed to reflecting, improving and fostering a better culture for everyone, with the advice and guidance from a coach and ongoing feedback. (See appendix K).

She manages to place the crisis within a larger narrative of learning, self- improvement and organisational development, shifting the focus from her own actions and reducing the perceived offensiveness of the act (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016).

5.2.2.4 Corrective action & Mortification

According to IRT, mortification includes that the actor admits guilt and expresses an apology, as well as corrective action, where the actor promises to resolve the issue and prevent it from recurring (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016). Mortification is highly visible and consistently repeated throughout Dietz's communication:

I understand the criticism, I take it to heart and I want to sincerely apologise without reservation. To all my fellow human beings, followers and collaborators, I have a responsibility. I have failed in that responsibility. (See appendix L) and:

I realize that regardless of whether it involves a friend or a stranger it is not acceptable to use just anything on one's social media. This should have been left out. I see that now. I take on your comments both here and in the media. Sorry. (See appendix O).

Dietz repeatedly returns to explicit acknowledgements of wrongdoing, responsibility and apology throughout the response: "It was wrong to film the incident. It was wrong to upload it on Youtube. It was wrong to involve my son. And it was wrong to not immediately call the police. There are no mitigating circumstances." (See appendix M). The repetitive structure strongly reinforces responsibility taking, apology and acknowledgment of harm, which makes mortification dominant throughout her response (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016).

Djerf similarly uses mortification extensively: "To anyone who I've hurt or let down, I want to start off by saying that I'm genuinely sorry." (See appendix H) and "I take these accusations very seriously and if my actions have made anyone feel mistreated, I sincerely

apologize.” (See appendix K). These statements clearly express regret and apology. However, compared to Dietz, Djerf’s mortification is more frequently combined with explanations, organisational framing and value based positioning (see appendices I & K). Once again Djerf’s corrective action, the promises to resolve the issue and prevent it from recurring, takes an approach towards a organisationally oriented response:

We are constantly working on improving and developing the internal business, everything from structures that need to be set in place to new initiatives. This is ongoing work and this year we've made some important changes to improve the work culture at Djerf Avenue. Amongst other things, we have hired a more experienced management team, we have introduced monthly anonymous surveys to collect feedback and take action, we have also set up an external organizational psychologist to assess our workplace. We are also in the process of bringing in an additional external HR professional to support the organisation. (See appendix I).

While at the same time Djerf highlights personal improvements and personal growth: “Moving forward, I'm committed and want to focus my all on becoming the best leader and colleague I can be.” (See appendix J). Unlike Djerf, Dietz frames immediate corrective actions: “The video was removed immediately when I realized the mistake”, “I have removed the video and look forward to creating better and more thoughtful content looking forward” and “I will now reflect on my actions to ensure this does not happen again” (see appendices O & M). These statements directly align with corrective action through promises of behavioural change and prevention, making Dietz responsibility taking more visible (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016).

Overall, both Djerf and Dietz primarily rely on mortification and corrective action, which is consistent with the high levels of attributed responsibility and perceived offensiveness surrounding the crisis. However, Dietz’s communication remains more consistently centered around mortification, where repeated apologies, direct, while denial, defeasibility, and bolstering remain secondary. In contrast, Djerf combines mortification with stronger elements of defeasibility, transcendence, and value-based bolstering linked to leadership and brand identity.

According to Frandsen and Johansen (2020), combining multiple image repair strategies may weaken credibility, particularly when the strategies appear contradictory. In this regard Dietz’s communication appears more rhetorically coherent, whereas Djerf’s

broad combination of apology, contextual explanation, and identity-based bolstering may complicate perceptions of full accountability. At the same time, Frandsen and Johansen (2020) emphasize that expressions of regret do not necessarily constitute full admissions of guilt. Therefore the actor should carefully identify the accusations being addressed, the audience they seek to persuade and the communicative resources available to strengthen the message of their crisis responses (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

While previous research has mainly examined personal branding, audience relationships, cancel culture and post-crisis image repair separately, this study builds upon these concepts to develop a deeper understanding within the research fields Brand communication and Crisis communication. Further, how they interact in the context of cancellations. In relation to previous research, the study has therefore examined (1) how influencers can be understood as personal brands and how they can become subject to cancel culture, as well as (2) how influencers use crisis communication in social media to repair their personal brand.

Regarding RQ1, the study contributes nuanced knowledge, by demonstrating how influencers can be understood as personal brands constructed through strategically communicated values. These values are continuously reinforced through social media interaction, while audiences simultaneously participate in shaping and evaluating the brand through processes of value co-creation and norm enforcement. The findings further show that influencers become subject to cancel culture when there is a perceived contradiction between their communicated identity and their actions. Cancel culture can therefore be understood as a collective accountability process in which audiences negotiate norms, legitimacy and credibility through social media interaction. Consequently, cancellations affect not only the individual incident, but also the broader symbolic meaning and trust associated with the personal brand. The study further demonstrates that influencers' personal branding before the cancellation, together with their crisis communication during the cancellation, influences how responsibility is attributed to the actor, by audiences during cancellations. This in turn, influenced which crisis response strategies became relevant and credible in relation to the crisis situation.

Regarding RQ2, the study contributes nuanced knowledge about how the influencers use crisis communication during cancellations to repair their personal brands. The analysis demonstrates that rebuild strategies, particularly apology, mortification and corrective action, become central in crises characterised by high attributed responsibility and severe reputational threat. At the same time, influencers combine these strategies with contextual explanations, bolstering and value based self-positioning in order to negotiate responsibility and protect their brand identity. The comparative study further suggests that the balance between responsibility taking and self-defense in communication influences how coherent and credible the crisis response appears.

The conclusion of the study is therefore that cancel culture in relation to influencers cannot be understood solely as isolated public criticism, but rather as a crisis process deeply connected to the communicative construction of personal brands and the relational dynamics of social media. Influencers become particularly vulnerable to cancellation because their brands are built upon perceived authenticity, emotional closeness and moral credibility, while simultaneously being continuously negotiated and evaluated by audiences in digital environments. Consequently, crisis communication in cancellations involves not only repairing reputation after norm violations, but also attempting to restore the disrupted relationship between the influencer, their communicated values and the audience that co-creates the meaning of the personal brands.

6.1 Further research

This study was primarily limited to the direct crisis phase (crisis). Hence, the concepts of crisis history and prior relational reputation within SCCT were not included. This means that the study does not examine how previous crises or earlier relationships with audiences may have influenced the attribution of responsibility and thereby how they could intensify the crisis. Future research could therefore expand the analytical scope by including these dimensions. This in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how earlier reputation and crisis history shape crisis communication during cancellations. Furthermore, the study does not include audience comments or reactions, which limits the possibility of analysing how crisis response strategies were perceived. Lastly future studies could also involve studying influencers who become subject to secondary cancellation, for example cases where influencers are exposed to cancel culture due to collaborating with a company being cancelled. This could broaden the research field of a relatively new phenomenon with limited research.

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8. Tables

Tabel 1: IRT crisis response strategies

Strategy	Tactic	Action
Denial	<i>Shift blame</i>	Responsibility is redirected toward another person or organization that is portrayed as the true cause of the problem.
	<i>Simple Denial</i>	The accused directly states that the event never occurred or that they were not involved in it.
Evade responsibility	<i>Defeasibility</i>	The accused claims that the wrongdoing resulted from lack of information, limited knowledge or lack of ability, rather than deliberate intent.
	<i>Accident</i>	The event is described as unintentional and beyond full control.
	<i>Provocation</i>	The accused argues that the action was a reaction to external pressure or the behavior of others.
	<i>Good Intentions</i>	The accused argues that the action was motivated by positive aims despite its negative outcome.
Reducing offensiveness	<i>Bolstering</i>	Highlighting positive qualities or past actions.
	<i>Differentiation</i>	Comparing it to worse actions.

	<i>Minimization</i>	Downplaying the seriousness of the event.
	<i>Transcendens</i>	Placing it in a more positive context.
	<i>Attack accuser</i>	Questions the accuser's credibility.
	<i>Compensation</i>	Offering payment or help to those affected.
Corrective action		The accused tries to solve the problem and prevent similar situations from occurring again, by highlighting practical measures and improvements.
Mortifikation		The accused openly accepts responsibility for the wrongdoing, apologizes and asks the audience for forgiveness.

Note: The table is based on Benoit's five main categories of verbal defense, their tactics, and main actions presented by Frandsen & Johansen (2016).

Table 2: Thematic analysis framework

The stepwise thematic analysis according to Bryman (2016)	Practical applications in each stage:
<i>1. Read through the material to be analyzed</i>	The material was read several times in order to become familiar with the content and develop an overall understanding.
<i>2. Begin coding the materials</i>	Thereafter an open coding process was conducted in which smaller sections of the text were highlighted and assigned codes

	based on their content and meaning. The coding was used to structure the material and identify key expressions and recurring patterns.
<i>3. Elaborate many of the codes into themes</i>	The codes were then compared and grouped according to similarities and relationships. Through this process, broader themes were developed that captured central patterns within the material.
<i>4. Evaluate the higher-order codes or themes</i>	The themes were reviewed and evaluated to ensure that they represented the material in a clear and relevant manner. At this stage, potential subthemes and relationships between different themes were also identified. The themes and subthemes were subsequently given clear names and labels that reflected their content and analytical significance.
<i>5. Examine possible links and connections between concepts and/ or how the concepts vary in terms of features of the cases</i>	Furthermore connections and relationships between themes and subthemes were analyzed in order to illustrate how different parts of the material related to one another and how variations could be understood in relation to the context of the study
<i>6. Write up insights from previous stages to provide a compelling narrative about the data</i>	Finally the results were compiled into an analytical presentation in which the themes were linked to the study's aim, research question and previous research in order to create a coherent analysis.

	In the concluding stage the identified themes were justified and validated by explaining why the themes were significant and how they had been identified through coding and analysis process. This contributed to the transparent and credible analysis.
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Note: Bryman (2016) steps of thematic analysis and practical applications.

Table 3: Empirical posts

Post	Dietz/ Djerf	Personal Brand Post/ Crisis Communication Post	Short descriptive text
Appendix: A	Djerf	Personal Brand Post	Expressing gratitude to the Djerf Avenue family.
Appendix: B	Djerf	Personal Brand Post	Affirmations about well being, socially caring and gratefulness.
Appendix: C	Djerf	Personal Brand Post	Gentle reminders to inspire her followers to treat themselves well.
Appendix: D	Dietz	Personal Brand Post	Urges her followers to donate especially to those in need.
Appendix: E	Dietz	Personal Brand Post	Expressing gratitude for good feedback on her social media posts.
Appendix: F	Dietz	Personal Brand Post	Pays tribute and expresses her love for her son.
Appendix: G	Djerf	Crisis Communication Post	Explains her silence on social media and expresses that she thinks it is important to speak directly to her followers.
Appendix: H	Djerf	Crisis Communication Post	Apologises and explains the underlying organizational background to the crisis.

Appendix: I	Djerf	Crisis Communication Post	Writes about the organizational changes that will happen within the company following the crisis.
Appendix: J	Djerf	Crisis Communication Post	Expresses gratitude to her followers, looks ahead and writes about self learning.
Appendix: K	Djerf	Crisis Communication Post	Responds to criticism by apologizing, emphasizing seriousness of the situation and personal development.
Appendix: L	Dietz	Crisis Communication Post	Apologizes and explains the sequence of events surrounding the incident.
Appendix: M	Dietz	Crisis Communication Post	Emphasizes that her way of acting was wrong.
Appendix: N	Dietz	Crisis Communication Post	Explains the underlying factors behind her actions.
Appendix: O	Dietz	Crisis Communication Post	Apologizes and responds to criticism on her story.
Appendix: P	Dietz	Crisis Communication Post	Promotes her SVT documentary that depicts the event and emphasizes personal development.

Note: The table illustrates which appendix is connected to what influencer, whether it is a personal brand post or a crisis communication post as well as a short description of the post.

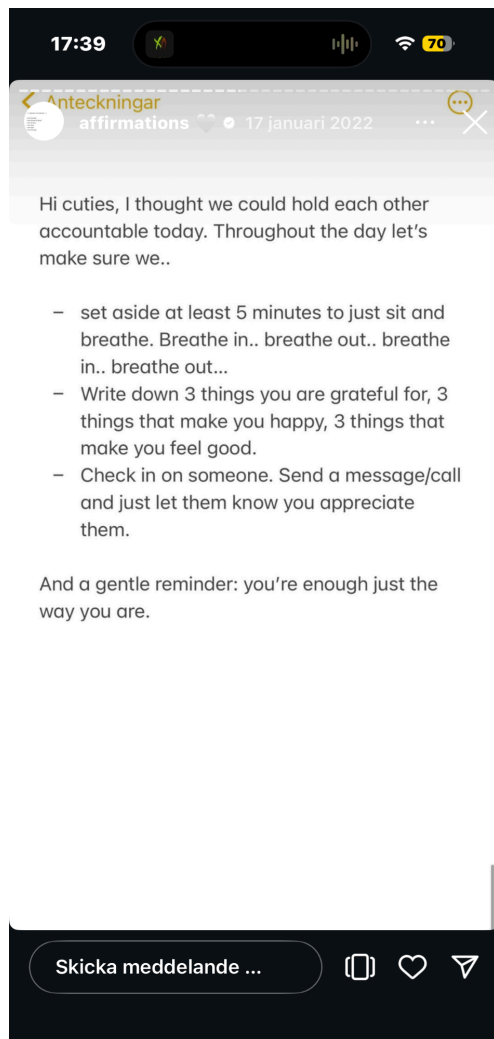
9. Appendices

Appendix: A



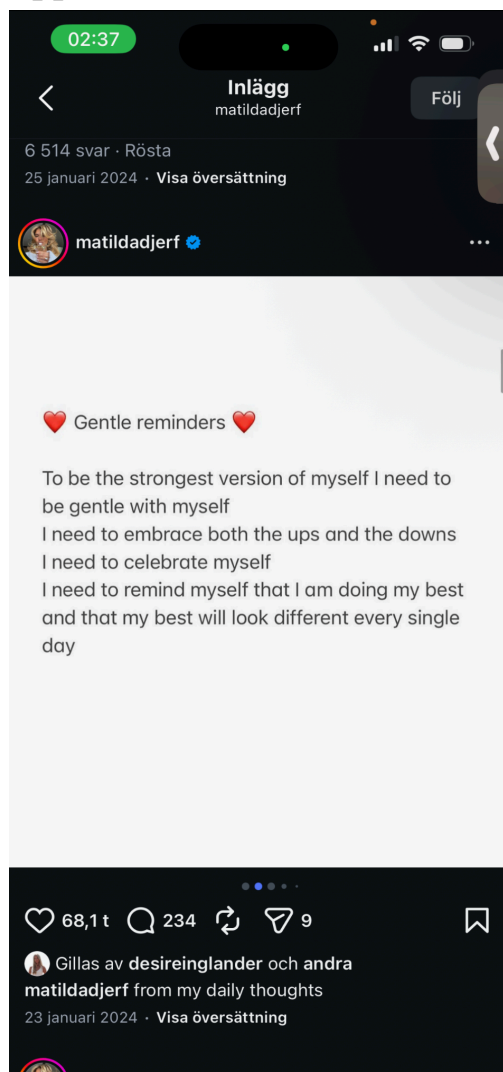
Adapted from: Matilda Djerf (@matildadjerf), 5/6-23

Appendix: B



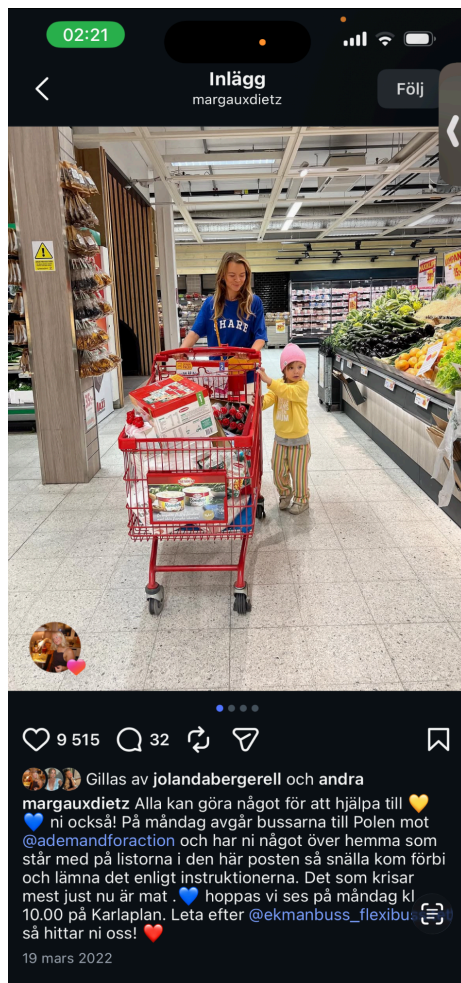
Adapted from: Matilda Djerf (@matildadjerf), 17/1-22

Appendix: C



Adapted from: Matilda Djerf (@matildadjerf), 23/1-24

Appendix: D



Adapted from: Margaux Dietz (@margauxdietz), 19/3-22

English translation: *Everyone can do something to help 🧡💙 you too! On Monday the buses will depart for Poland to @ademandforaction and if you have anything spare at home that's listed in this post please stop by and leave it according to the instructions. What's most urgently needed right now is food. 💙 Hope to see you on Monday at 10:00 AM at Karlaplan. Look for @ekmanbuss_flexibussar and you'll find us! ❤️*

Appendix: E



Adapted from: Margaux Dietz (@margauxdietz), 3/3-22

English translation: *Hi and thank you for saying that the new video is among my best ❤️ it feels good to be able to open up and talk with you all ❤️*

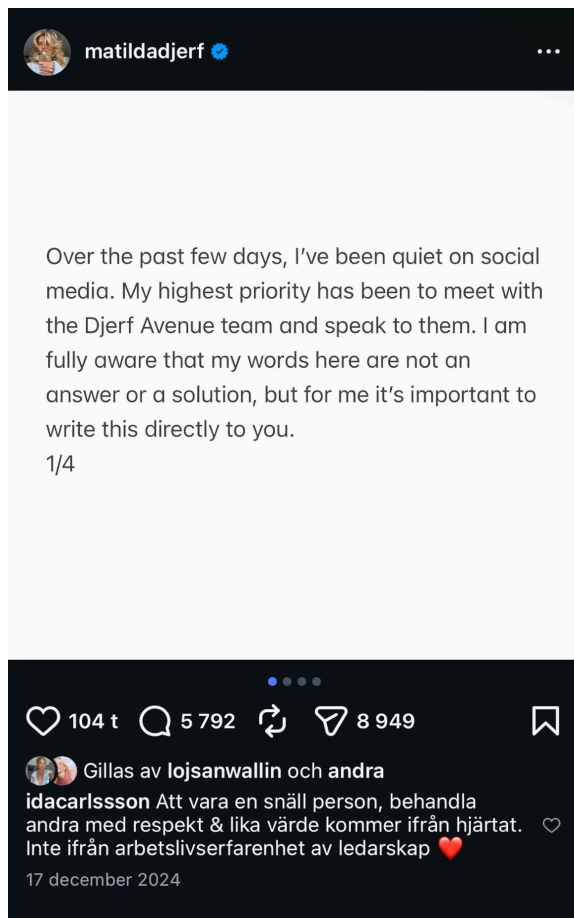
Appendix: F



Adapted from: Margaux Dietz (@margauxdietz), 27/4-22

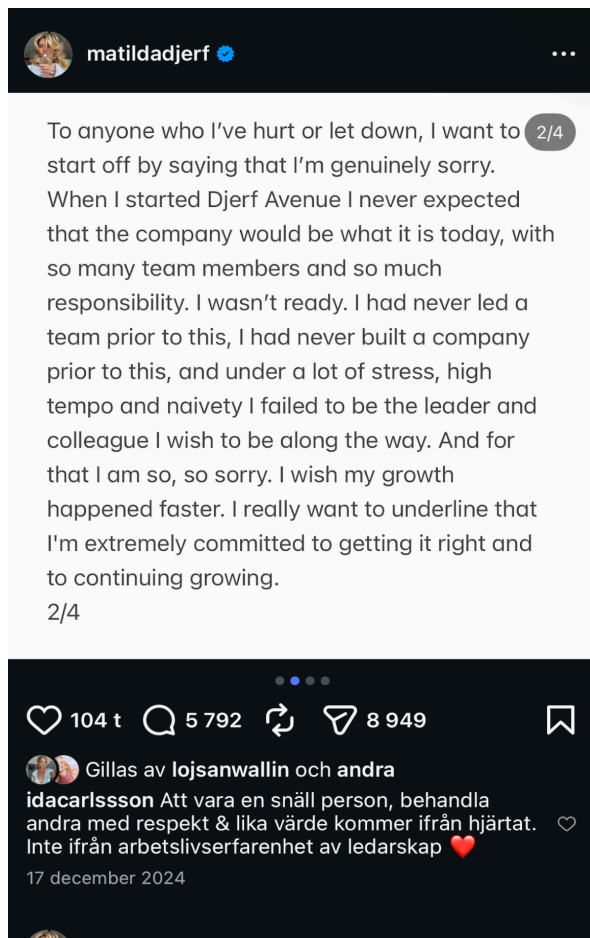
English translation: *My sunshine in life, I'm so happy it was you who came into this world five years ago. Not a single day goes by without you showing me what happiness is and what life is really about. It's amazing how someone so small can spread so much joy and love. I can't even imagine where life will take you but I know you'll be able to do anything ❤️ Thank you for letting me be your mom 💕 I love you more than words can ever express 🥰*

Appendix: G



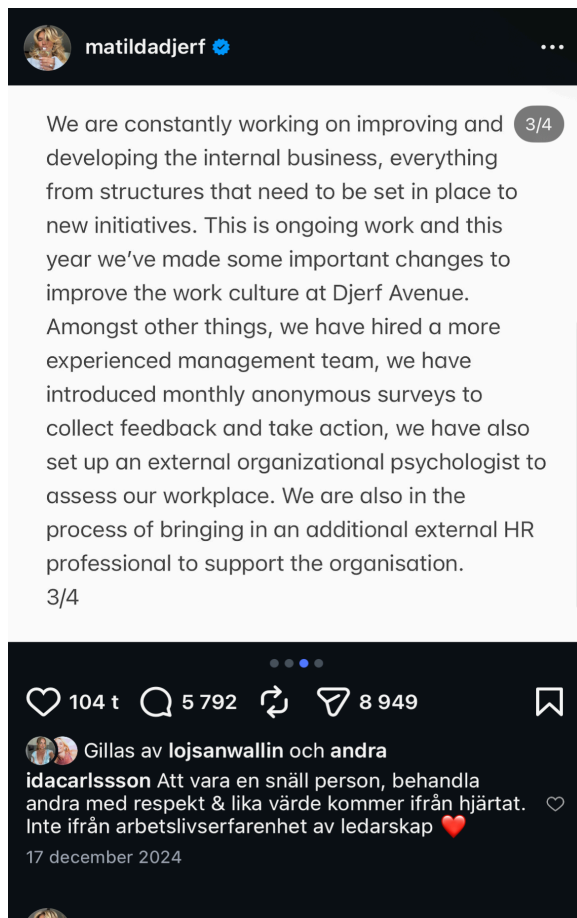
Adapted from: Matilda Djerf (@matildadjerf), 17/12-24

Appendix: H



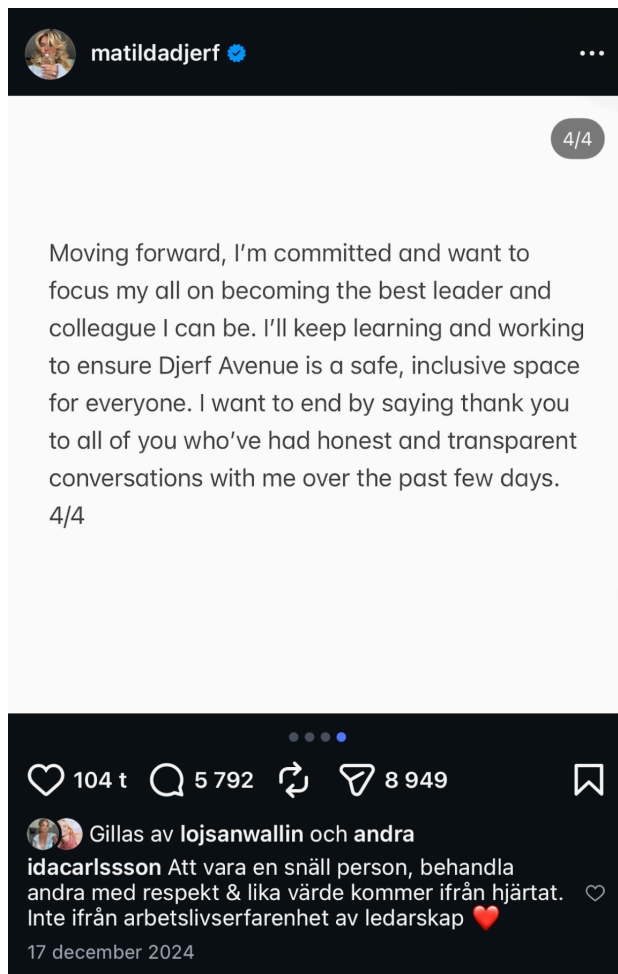
Adapted from: Matilda Djerf (@matildadjerf), 17/12-24

Appendix: I



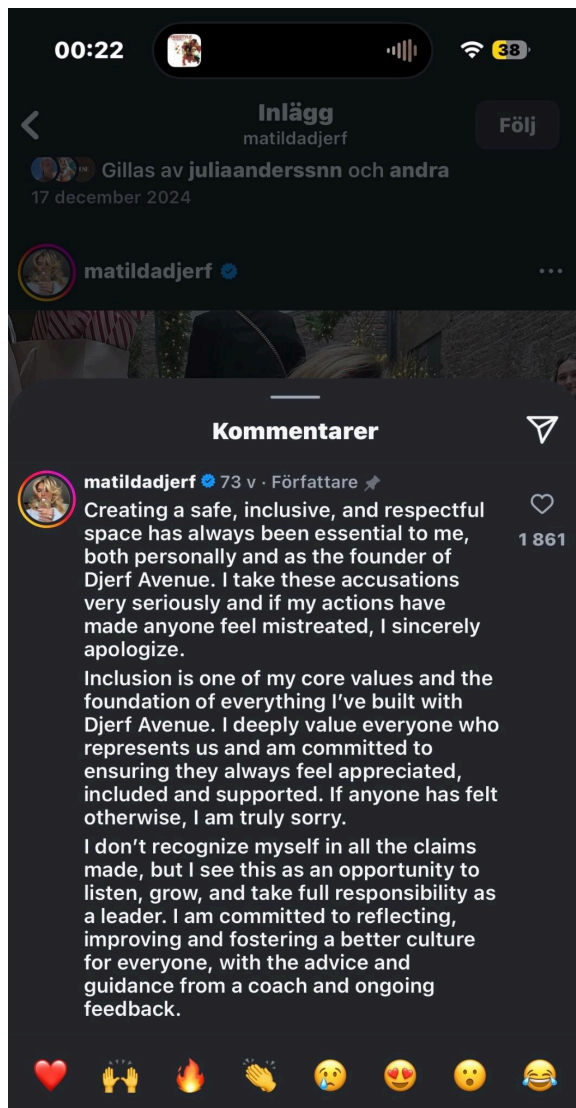
Adapted from: Matilda Djerf (@matildadjerf), 17/12-24

Appendix: J



Adapted from: Matilda Djerf (@matildadjerf), 17/12-24

Appendix: K



Adapted from: Matilda Djerf (@matildadjerf), 09/12-24

Appendix L:

De senaste dagarna har jag fått hård kritik för en video jag lade ut förra veckan. Jag förstår kritiken, tar till mig av den och vill förbehållslöst be om ursäkt. Mot alla mina medmänniskor, följare och samarbetspartners har jag ett ansvar. Jag har brustit i det ansvaret.

Det som hände var följande. Tidigt på morgonen upptäcker en medarbetare som är på väg till mig att en berusad ung man sover utanför dörren till min lägenhet. Jag får från min kollega i trapphuset höra att han liknar en familjevän och förutsätter felaktigt att det är så. Därför är min son bredvid mig när jag öppnar dörren, vilket han inte borde ha varit. Så fort jag tittat till mannen ringer jag en vän för att be om råd, ska jag ringa polis eller ambulans? Jag vill inte ringa 112 som redan blir nedringda med onödiga ärenden. Därefter ringer vi polisen. Detta sker inom loppet av ett par minuter.

Adapted from: Margaux Dietz (@margauxdietz), 05/11-22

English translation: *In recent days I've received harsh criticism for a video I posted last week. I understand the criticism, I take it to heart and I want to apologize unreservedly. I have a responsibility toward my fellow human beings, my followers and my partners. I failed in that responsibility.*

What happened was the following. Early in the morning an employee on their way to me discovered an intoxicated young man sleeping outside the door to my apartment. My colleague in the stairwell told me that he resembled a family friend and I wrongly assumed that was the case. That is why my son was beside me when I opened the door, which he should not have been. As soon as I checked on the man I called a friend to ask for advice, should I call the police or an ambulance? I didn't want to call 112 which is already overwhelmed with unnecessary calls. After that we called the police. All this happened within the span of just a few minutes.

Appendix: M

Händelsen filmades och några delar av denna händelse lades i torsdags ut på min Youtubekanal. Filmen togs omedelbart bort när jag insåg misstaget.

Det var fel att filma händelsen. Det var fel att lägga ut det på Youtube. Det var fel att blanda in min son. Och det var fel att inte omedelbart ringa polisen.

Det finns inga förmildrande omständigheter. Inte att jag först trodde att det var en person jag kände eller att det fanns andra vuxna i närheten. Jag brast i ansvar och kommer nu att rannsaka mig själv för att det inte ska upprepas.

Jag inser att många är besvikna på mig. Jag kommer lämna kommentarsfältet öppet och förstår er som är arga eller upprörda. Men jag skulle vilja be er att hålla diskussionen så fri från påhopp som möjligt.

Adapted from: Margaux Dietz (@margauxdietz), 05/11-22

English translation: *The incident was filmed and parts of it were uploaded to my YouTube channel last Thursday. The video was removed immediately once I realized my mistake.*

It was wrong to film the incident. It was wrong to upload it to YouTube. It was wrong to involve my son. And it was wrong not to call the police immediately.

There are no mitigating circumstances. Not that I initially believed it was someone I knew nor that there were other adults nearby. I failed in my responsibility and I will now reflect deeply on myself to make sure this never happens again.

I understand that many people are disappointed in me. I will leave the comment section open, and I understand those of you who are angry or upset. But I would like to ask that the discussion remain as free from personal attacks as possible.

Appendix N:

Jag vill tydliggöra att jag hade agerat annorlunda om mannen var i nöd, eller medvetslös som många medier felaktigt skrivit. Eftersom han var kontaktbar kunde jag göra bedömningen att han inte var i fara eller utgjorde någon fara för oss. Det var en korrekt bedömning och polisen drog samma slutsats direkt när de kom. Jag förstår att den klippta filmen ger ett annat intryck. Det smärta mig att många tror att jag äventyrat någons liv och hälsa.

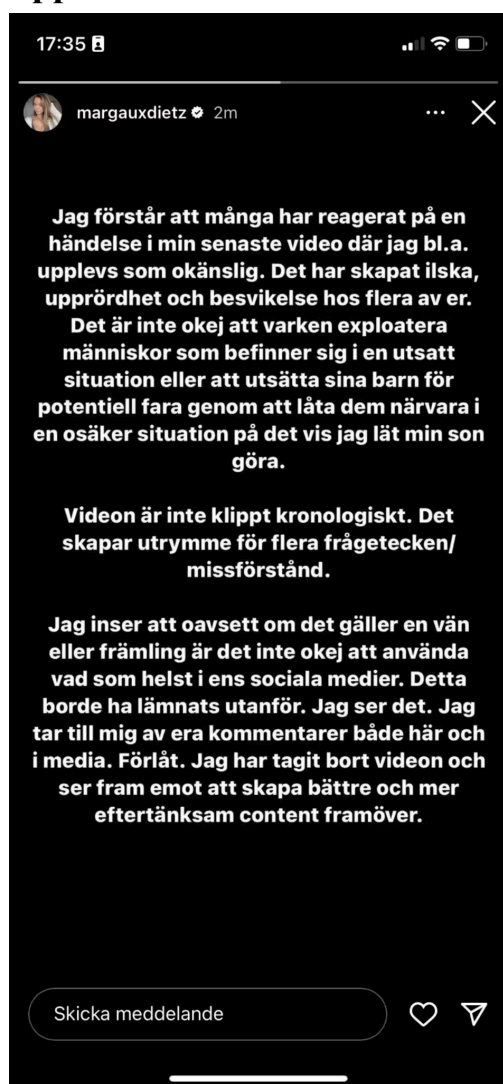
Jag söker sedan upp personen i fråga och ber om ursäkt då jag hoppades att jag inte skrämde honom genom att ringa polisen. Han bad om ursäkt till mig för att han somnat utanför fel dörr och meddelade att han mårde bra och nu befann sig på rätt plats i samma fastighet.

Adapted from: Margaux Dietz (@margauxdietz), 05/11-22

English translation: *I want to clarify that I would have acted differently if the man had been in distress, or unconscious as many media outlets have incorrectly reported. Because he was responsive I was able to assess that he was not in danger and did not pose any danger to us. That was the correct assessment and the police reached the same conclusion as soon as they arrived. I understand that the edited video gives a different impression. It pains me that many people believe I endangered someone's life and health.*

I later sought the person in question and apologized because I hoped I hadn't frightened him by calling the police. He apologized to me for falling asleep outside the wrong door and told me that he was fine and was now in the correct place elsewhere in the same building.

Appendix O:



Adapted from: Margaux Dietz (@margauxdietz), 05/11-22

English translation: *I understand that many people have reacted to an incident in my recent video where I among other things came across as insensitive. It has caused anger, frustration and disappointment among many of you. It is not okay to exploit people who are in vulnerable situations nor is it okay to expose your children to potential danger by allowing them to be present in an unsafe situation the way I allowed my son to be.*

The video was not edited chronologically. Which created room for several questions and misunderstandings.

I realize that regardless of whether it concerns a friend or a stranger it is not okay to use just anything on social media. This should have been left out. I see that now. I have taken your comments to heart both here and in the media. I'm sorry. I have removed the video and look forward to creating better and more thoughtful content going forward.

Appendix P:



Adapted from: Margaux Dietz (@margauxdietz), 22/12-22

English translation: *There is now an SVT documentary that I've taken part in portraying the recent period of my life. Letting go of control and allowing public service television to make such an intimate portrayal in the middle of a storm was not an easy decision. I still don't know how the programme will turn out, let alone how it will be received. SVT has filmed many hours and it wasn't easy to let my guard down during a time when I perhaps really wanted to keep it up. But it feels like the right thing to do. Both those of you who follow me and those who don't, but who are engaged in current social issues, deserve genuine answers to difficult questions. And it feels good to be able to tell this story in a slower format than Instagram or YouTube. I've learnt a lot recently and the learning continues. Take care of yourselves and each other.*