**Imperial College London**

**Doctoral Thesis**

# Exploring The Dark Side of Marketing: Essays on Toxic Customers, Vengeful Customer Reviews, And the Influencer-Brand Authenticity Crisis

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Marketing

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# Statement of Originality

I, Barbara Duffek, declare that this thesis titled, "*Exploring The Dark Side of Marketing: A Study Of Toxic Customers, Vengeful Customer Reviews, And The Influencer-Brand Authenticity Crisis*", and the work presented are my own. I confirm that:

- This work was done wholly while in candidature for a research degree at Imperial College Business School.
- Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed.
- Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work.
- Where I am a co-author of work (Chapter 1 of this thesis, published as Duffek, Eisingerich and Merlo 2023), the systematic literature review, write-up and synthesis is entirely my work. My co-authors, Andreas B. Eisingerich and Omar Merlo have been consulted in the ideation, theorization, and write-up stage, but the submitted work is my own and I have made a major contribution to the writing of Chapter 1.
- The thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, inclusive of table, figures, bibliographies, appendices and footnotes.

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# Abstract

The primary objective of this thesis is to enhance our understanding of the dark side of marketing, particularly focusing on brand transgressions and service failures. The first chapter within this thesis entails a systematic literature review of brand transgressions and service failures. Through a comprehensive examination of pertinent marketing literature, a conceptual framework is introduced to elucidate the reasons behind customers exhibiting toxic behaviors, either with the intent to harm or to help brands.

Building upon this conceptual framework, the second chapter delves deeper into the analysis of toxic customer behavior towards brands, specifically investigating vengeful customer reviews intended to inflict harm upon the targeted firms. Through lab and field experiments and observational data analysis, the second chapter establishes the pivotal role of rumination in driving vengeful reviews and proposes that redirecting rumination can mitigate its influence on vengeful behavior, thus resulting in less vengeful written reviews.

The third chapter of this thesis scrutinizes the dark side of marketing from the perspective of influencers. Consumers have become increasingly distrustful of influencers who often work with brands for monetary gains. Consumers' criticism of influencers has given rise to the authenticity crisis, wherein influencers are believed to be inauthentic in their brand collaborations. This chapter of the thesis aims to define the concept of influencer authenticity and explores effective strategies for brands to engage with influencers in ways that foster the creation of authentic content that resonates with consumers.

Through an examination of customer toxicity, vengeful customer reviews, and the brand transgressions in the form of an influencer authenticity crisis, this thesis endeavours to uncover the dark side of marketing, thereby facilitating a deeper comprehension of the associated challenges and potential remedies within these domains.

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# Introduction

The thesis consists of three chapters which focus on the broad topic of firm transgressions, thus contribution to ongoing discussions in the consumer-based marketing strategy literature. Through an examination of customer toxicity, vengeful customer reviews, and the brand transgressions in the form of an influencer authenticity crisis, this thesis endeavours to uncover the dark side of marketing, thereby facilitating a deeper comprehension of the associated challenges and potential remedies within these domains. Chapters 1 and 2 delve deeper into understanding why customers turn against firms to harm and revenge them and provides theoretical discussion around the underlying process mechanism. Chapter 3 looks at brand transgression from the viewpoint of brand managers and addresses the ongoing academic and managerial discussion on the authenticity crisis.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I review the literature on brand transgressions and service failures, drawing on the work of Duffek et al. (2023). Through a comprehensive examination of pertinent marketing literature, a conceptual framework is introduced to elucidate the reasons behind customers exhibiting toxic behaviors, either with the intent to harm or to help brands. The contribution of the first chapter lies in bringing clarity to the mental process of customers who engage in actions that could potentially harm the firm. Furthermore, it also sheds light on the critical role of rumination in driving toxic customer behavior.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I delve deeper into the analysis of toxic customer behavior towards brands, specifically investigating vengeful customer reviews intended to inflict harm upon the targeted firms. Through lab and field experiments and observational data analysis, the second chapter establishes the pivotal role of rumination in driving vengeful reviews and proposes that redirecting rumination can mitigate its influence on vengeful behavior, thus resulting in less vengeful written reviews. The contribution of the second chapter lies in introducing an easily implementable change to review collection; namely, the paper proposes to collect ratings before collecting written reviews to reduce the vengefulness of online reviews. The second contribution of the chapter lies in the introduction of rumination refocusing, a novel perspective on how rumination and its impact on consumer behavior can be reduced.

In the third chapter of the thesis, I scrutinize the dark side of marketing from the perspective of influencers. Managerial discussion has raised concerns regarding an authenticity crisis, where influencers collaborate with brands that they lack genuine belief in, solely driven by financial motivations. Consequently, customers have become increasingly distrustful of influencers, exhibiting scepticism towards influencer-brand partnerships, and often resorting to unfollowing or disregarding influencer content. This chapter of the thesis aims to define the concept of influencer authenticity and explores effective strategies for brands to engage with influencers in ways that foster the creation of authentic content that resonates with consumers. The contribution of the third chapter of the thesis lies in enhancing our understanding of how various stakeholders view authenticity. It also sheds light on how the tensions arising from these differing perceptions of authenticity can be effectively addressed by the various stakeholders.

# Chapter 1:
# Why So Toxic? A Framework for Exploring Customer Toxicity

Customers are increasingly empowered in their interactions with firms. Sometimes they help firms but, unfortunately, they can also become “toxic” and hurt them. Customers are toxic when they engage in deliberate and potentially harmful acts towards a firm driven either by a reparatory or damaging mental state following a transgression. Whilst the existing literature has studied customers’ negative actions against organizations, critical questions remain as to how and why customers become toxic. I structure a fragmented field of research on customer toxicity and explore customers’ mental state before they decide to do nothing (non-complainers), avoid the brand, act against firms with either a reparatory mental state—and, thus, often constructive in nature (e.g., to initiate change)—or with a toxic mental state and destructive objectives (e.g., to harm and punish a firm). I highlight that the impact of these actions on a firm can still be “toxic” even without intention of harming and punishing. Furthermore, I outline the conceptual domain of customer toxicity and shift the focus from negative behavior to customers’ mental state, by integrating the marketing, aggression, and psychology literatures. I discuss the theoretical implications of my study and explore how future work may further examine organizations’ interactions with toxic customers. Finally, I provide managerial recovery techniques depending on customers’ mental state at a particular time.

# Introduction

Picture yourself after a terrible customer service experience, or an incident where a firm has severely let you down. How would you react? Would you do nothing? Or would you complain directly to the firm, and consider making a post on their social media pages, so as not to let them get away with it? Or would you voice your anger on third-party social media sites, attack the firm publicly, and perhaps even exaggerate your negative experience to harm the firm as much as possible? Or maybe you may just like to vent your frustration on a discussion board, take a deep breath, and simply promise yourself never to buy from that firm again? The type of actions you take, and your mental state, can determine the amount of harm you cause the firm and the type of response the firm would need to initiate to deal with it.

Prior work shows that when things go wrong, some customers stay silent (Ro & Mattila 2015), some avoid the brand, some share their experiences to initiate organizational change, while others decide to voice their concerns to vent, seek compensation, or actively harm the company (Kähr et al. 2016). Publicly sharing negative experiences, irrespective of whether customers aim to help *or* harm the firm, can represent a real and significant threat to any firm, particularly in a marketplace where the Internet has enabled fast and far-reaching sharing of negative information by customers. It can impact sales and purchase propensity, brand beliefs, and even stock prices (e.g., Monga & John 2008; Luo 2007; 2009; Berger, Sorensen & Rasmussen 2010). Therefore, it is important for academic researchers and managers to understand this phenomenon, the ways in which it may be mitigated, and possible coping strategies.

While existing research has conceptualized different toxic behaviors of customers, such as negative word-of-mouth (NWOM), exaggerated NWOM, brand sabotage, etc. (Romani et al. 2013; Kähr et al. 2016; Rotman, Khamitov & Connors 2017), several key questions remain unanswered. Specifically, while previous studies have made a strong case for individual customer behaviors and consequences, the literature remains largely fragmented and disjointed. These negative customer behaviors can be arranged on a continuum, ranging from non-complaint behaviors (Voorhees & Brady 2005), brand avoidance (Bechwati & Morrin 2003), and different types of constructive and destructive punitive actions (Romani, Grappi & Bagozzi 2013). Needed is an integration of that body of research, to develop a comprehensive framework that focuses on the entire process from the perspective of customers' mental state, ranging from customers who do nothing (non-complainers), to customers who avoid the brand, warn others, or seek revenge (see Khamitov, Grégoire & Suri 2020; Lages et al. 2023). Thus, in this chapter, I establish that toxicity has numerous outcomes, some of which are intended to be helpful (e.g., constructive feedback or non-complaint), whereas some result in loss of the customer base (e.g., brand avoidance), or harm the brand (e.g., revenge). In this chapter, I focus on customers' reactions to quality failure of a product or service and to brand transgressions and integrate the literature on negative behaviors that intend to harm and damage, and negative behaviors that are more constructive in nature, yet can still cause damage to the brand[1]. This will help us understand what drives the extent of aggression customers exert against firms, shed light on when and why customers turn to different negative behaviors, identify pathways for future research, and develop managerial tools to prevent a transgression escalating and causing financial harm (see Figure 2).

In this chapter, I employ theory synthesis to summarize and integrate the fragmented literature on the above-described behaviors (Jaakola 2020). More specifically, I integrate concepts across the fields of marketing, aggression, and psychology (rumination) to help structure a fragmented body of research on customer toxicity. In doing so, I outline the conceptual domain of *customer toxicity,* which I define as deliberate and potentially harmful acts of customers following a transgression, driven either by a reparatory mental state (e.g., constructive in nature, such as to initiate change and improvement)—or a damaging mental state (e.g., with destructive objectives, such as to harm and punish the firm). Although the underlying mental state of customers may be different, the effect of these toxic behaviors tends to be the same: they can damage the firm's image, reputation, and associations, and even hurt its financial performance (Grégoire & Fisher 2008; Monga & John 2008; Park et al. 2013; Fornell, Morgeson & Hult 2016; Jain & Sharma 2019). I posit that whether the customer does nothing, abandons the firm or turns to toxic behavior—and if so, which toxic behavior—is contingent on rumination. Rumination is defined as a set of conscious thoughts and repetitive evaluation of negative and damaging features of a situation (Martin & Tesser 1986).

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[1] In the context of the study, I look at firms intentional and unintentional failures that trigger a transgression.

My study, therefore, makes three key contributions to the literature on negative customer–firm relationships. First, I develop a conceptual framework from the initial transgression through to toxic behavior, integrating the literature on non-action, avoidance, and constructive and destructive behavior, and exploring the consequences of toxic behavior. Second, I shift focus merely from negative behaviors to an investigation of what drives them, i.e., the mental state of customers when they engage in toxic behavior. In so doing, I introduce the construct of customer toxicity. Third, I differentiate this toxic mental state from other related constructs through the lens of rumination, and consequently propose a set of important future research directions.

In addition to making important theoretical contributions, I also identify key managerial implications. My study examines and highlights the different options available to managers to intervene, and the kind of recovery actions that can mitigate the circumstances. I posit that there are multiple instances, from the initial transgression to toxic customer behavior, when the firm can still engage in recovery actions and provide redress. An understanding of customers' mental state is pivotal from a managerial perspective because a customers' mental state is a key driver behind the nature of their toxic behavior. In the next section, I offer a discussion of the growing literature on toxic customer behavior. I then present my conceptual framework and research propositions. I conclude by discussing the implications for future research and practice.

## Customer Toxicity

The term “toxicity” originates from the Latin word toxicum— ‘poison’—and is defined as something that is “extremely harsh, malicious, or harmful” (Merriam-Webster 2022). In the medical literature, toxicity has been defined as the “degree to which a substance (a toxin or poison) can harm humans or animals” (Shield 2022). In the leadership literature, toxic leaders are those that are “exploitative, abusive, destructive…corrupt and poisonous” (Walton 2007: 20). Similarly, customers can be toxic and harm firms. Table A1 (in Appendix A) reviews prior literature on toxic customer behaviors. In the leadership literature, leaders have been shown to become toxic to maintain personal status (Stein 2007). In the context of employee-customer toxicity, employees turn toxic towards customers when customers behave aggressively and place unreasonable pressure on them (Kern & Grandey 2009). In the context of customer toxicity, the pathway towards toxic behaviors begins when something goes wrong in an interaction between the customer and the firm. In this study I am concerned with customer toxicity triggered by perceptions of a firm’s wrongdoing (i.e., a transgression), rather than because of a customer’s own negative feeling (e.g., toxicity in the front-line employee context). Also, I focus on customer behavior directed towards a firm, rather than the mistreatment of individual employees.

The spark that ignites a toxic customer relationship is usually a transgression, or negative stimuli originating from the firm that fall below a customer’s expectations and/or violate customers’ values. Kähr et al. (2016) define these negative stimuli as *performance- and value-based stimulus violations* (Weun, Beatty & Jones 2004; Chan & Wan 2008; Brigden & Häubl 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen 2020). Performance-based stimulus violation denotes a quality failure of a product or service, whereas a value-based stimulus violation arises when the firm's behavior (such as an antisocial or unethical act) is in conflict with the customer's values (Kähr et al. 2016). Following a transgression, customers can engage in multiple behaviors to voice their concerns, facilitate change, vent their feelings, be heard, or hurt the firm. These behaviors can range from non-complaint and brand avoidance to deviant and dysfunctional customer behaviors (Reynolds & Harris 2006; 2009). Kähr and colleagues (2016) differentiate between hostile and instrumental behaviors, while Grégoire & Fisher (2008) define these as retaliatory behaviors. Table 1 defines the various behaviors further.

## Consequences Of Customer Toxicity

Customer toxicity can be very damaging. For example, it can affect the financial performance of a firm, including sales and propensity to buy (Gopinath, Thomas & Krishnamurthi 2014). It can weaken the stock price, stock returns, and cash flow, and increase stock volatility (Luo 2007, 2009). It can also influence market share (Tang 2017; Lin & Kalwani 2018). Customer complaints have been shown to have a larger effect on stock and shareholder value than customer satisfaction (Gruca & Rego 2005; Luo & Homburg 2008; Anderson & Mansi 2009; Fornell et al. 2016). Customer performance (e.g., customer satisfaction, customer-brand attachment, loyalty, and brand associations) can also suffer because of toxic customer behavior. Negative publicity can negatively affect perceptions of a brand (Monga & John 2008) and dilute brand image (Monga & Hsu 2018). The "love becomes hate" effect is also a prevalent aftermath of a serious transgression: brand love and strong brand attachment can turn into more intense negative emotions, such as hate, following a transgression (Grégoire & Fisher 2008; Jain & Sharma 2019). In other words, the customers who are most strongly connected with a brand are those that are most likely to turn against it violently when they are let down. Brand loyalty and customer satisfaction levels can also be impaired following a transgression. If the firm does not offer adequate recovery, customer loyalty towards a firm can suffer. Dissatisfaction following such incidents can lead to customer exit (Buttle & Burton 2002).

## Table 1: Review of constructs

| Prominent article | Behavior | Findings | Context | How is customer toxicity (CT) different? |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Fullerton & Punj 1993 | Aberrant customer behavior | "Behavior in exchange settings which violates the generally accepted norms of conduct in such situations, and which is therefore held in disrepute by marketers and by most consumers." (p. 570) | Misbehaving customers | CT defines the behavior when customers fight the firm after a service failure or brand transgression |
| Bitner, Booms & Mohr 1994 | Problem customers | Inappropriate customer behaviors, where the customer is wrong, yet the customer experiences dissatisfaction | Service context | In case of CT, it is not the customer who is wrong, but the customer reacts to a firm's performance- or value- based stimulus violation (transgression) |
| Lovelock 1994 | Jaycustomer behavior | Customers who misconsume, similarly to jaywalkers who cross streets in unauthorized places | Service encounters | I explore customer behavior when the firm has engaged in a transgression (rather than when the customer misconsumes) |
| Moschis & Cox 1989; Reynolds & Harris 2006 | Deviant customer behavior | Deliberate acts of customers that violate widely held norms | Service encounters | In case of CT, customers do not disrupt service encounters, but react to failed service encounters and brand transgressions |
| Stein 2007 | Toxicity in the Employee-Customer interface | FLE retaliate against customers who exhibit severe pressure towards workers, and workers engage in revenge behavior as a result | Front-line service employees | CT explores when and why customers turn against brands (and not FLEs) |
| Walton 2007 | Leadership toxicity | Normally competent, accomplished leaders behave badly to the detriment of the effectiveness of their organization" (Walton, 2007, p.19) | Leadership | CT explores when and why customers turn against brands. Toxic customers are similar to toxic leaders in that their behavior can cause detriment to the brand |
| Grégoire & Fisher 2008 | Retaliatory behavior | Customer retaliation is the "customer's actions that are designed to punish and cause inconvenient to a firm for the damages the customer felt it caused (p. 247)". Customers demand for retaliation as a result of perceived betrayal with the aim of fairness restoration | Service failure | I explore and integrate the literature on all other factors (apart from perceived betrayal) that drive customer retaliation |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Grégoire, Tripp & Legoux, 2009 | Revenge and avoidance behavior | Customers form a desire for revenge to harm brands, and desire for avoidance to betray brands driven by brand hate | Online public complaining | CT defines the mental process when customers decide to engage in 'revenge' or 'avoidance' behavior, that is broader than online complaining |
| Kern & Grandey 2009 | Customer incivility | Customer harms the FLE (ignore employees, rudeness, speak to employees in disrespectful manner) | Organizational Behavior; service context | CT explores customers' reactions to service failure or brand transgression not towards the employee, but the firm |
| Harris & Reynolds 2003; Fisk et al. 2010 | Dysfunctional customer behaviors | "Customers who intentionally or unintentionally, overly or covertly, act in a manner that, in some way, disrupts otherwise functional service encounters" (Harris and Reynolds 2003:145) | Service encounters | In case of CT, customers do not disrupt service encounters, but react to failed service encounters and brand transgressions |
| Romani et al. 2013 | Constructive and destructive punitive action | Customers engage in 'constructive punitive action' to encourage brands to change behaviors, and in 'destructive punitive action' to harm brands | Corporate wrongdoings | CT explores the mental process when customers decide to engage in 'constructive punitive action' or 'destructive punitive actions' behavior |
| Kähr et al. 2016 | Instrumental aggression or hostile aggression | Deliberate behaviors by customers or noncustomers who have the dominant objective of causing harm to a brand | Performance (service failure) and value-based (brand transgression) stimulus violations | CT explores the mental process when customers decide to engage in 'instrumental aggression' or 'hostile aggression' |
| Lages et al. 2023 | Customer incivility | Integrates the literature on the dark side of customer behavior | Customer dysfunctional behavior, customer revenge and customer mistreatment | CT explores the mental process ranging from non-complainers, brand avoiders, to those who engage in constructive behavior too (and not only incivility) |
| This chapter | Customer toxicity | Deliberate and potentially harmful acts of customers following a transgression, driven either by a reparatory *or* damaging mental state towards a firm | Customers who respond to a service failure or a brand transgression in a public manner | 1. Through reviewing the literature on the antecedents, emotions & cognitions, and consequences of toxic behavior, I identify the mental state of customers from the transgression to toxic behavior. 2. I introduce a new construct of customer toxicity that differentiates between the mental state of customers. 3. Through integrating the literature on marketing, aggression, and psychology, I identify opportunities where management can intervene and stop a customer turning to toxic behavior. |

A common theme emerging from this body of research is that customers can act against firms with either 'constructive' aims, (e.g., to induce change, or warn others), or with 'destructive' aims (e.g., to harm, cause impairment and punish). The literature defines both forms of actions as deliberate customer acts, with an inherent underlying goal to achieve something (either a change, a self-serving action, or harm; Grégoire & Fisher 2008). The impact of these actions on a firm can be negative even if they were not initiated by a customer with the intention of harming and punishing, but merely to facilitate change. Therefore, I collectively refer to these deliberate and potentially harmful acts of customers as *toxic customer behaviors,* driven with a different aims and objectives.

For instance, a company called Robinhood (a financial services company that facilitates commission-free trades of stocks) was recently the target of toxic customer behavior when it revealed that it would impose restrictions on trading of some stocks. This led to an online firestorm and PR crisis on Twitter and TikTok, which resulted in a brand image crisis, and 82.87% of Robinhood's social media mentions turned negative on January 28th, 2021 (Czarnecki 2021). Even though customers did not necessarily intend to harm the firm when they tweeted or posted on TikTok (some of them merely wanted to initiate change and discuss the events with a constructive and *reparatory*, rather than destructive and *toxic* mental state), their actions still harmed the firm and prompted it to revert its decision. More specifically, a form of negative consumer behavior, even if written by consumers' best intention, can still hurt the firm, as it can discourage others to buy the services of the company, or to approach the brand in the first place. Thus, even if a negative action is undertaken with a reparatory intent, it can still be harmful, as it can impact the firms' revenues and profitability.

### *Aggression theory and the role of rumination*

When something goes wrong in an interaction between the customer and the firm, customers can feel frustrated. Because aggression plays a central role in the toxicity framework, it is useful to look at aggression theories from social psychology for guidance, such as the frustration-aggression hypothesis (Berkowitz 1989). The frustration-aggression hypothesis states that frustration evokes negative affect, after which expressive-motor reactions initiate a flight or fight response, which may lead to aggressive inclinations (intention to fight reaction). Not every aggressive inclination leads to aggressive behavior, and the pathway is moderated by individual and environmental variables (Berkowitz 1989; Dill & Anderson 1995). Berkowitz (1989: 71) argues that frustrations arise from aversive events that "generate aggressive inclinations only to the extent that they produce negative affect". In the current context, I argue that frustration can arise from an external occurrence, which Berkowitz (1989) denotes as an aversive event. These events are transgressions, either quality failures of a product or service (e.g., a damaged baggage at the airport), or brand transgressions where a firm's behavior, for example, conflicts with its customer's values (Kähr et al. 2016). The aversive event gives rise to negative affect, which triggers expressive-motor reactions, such as feelings or thoughts (Berkowitz 1965).

If the aversive event creates a discrepancy between the customers' current state (e.g., no compensation for the damaged baggage at the airport), and desired end state (e.g., an undamaged baggage), and the customer continues to dwell on the discrepancy, rumination will ensue (Martin & Tesser 1996). There are different perspectives and definitions of rumination (Nolen-Hoeksema, McBride & Larson 1997; Martin & Tesser 1996). I follow Martin & Tesser's (1996) seminal work on rumination, as it concerns discrepancies between current and desired outcomes, including problems or failures. Martin & Tesser (1996: 1) define rumination as "a class of conscious thoughts that revolve around a common instrumental theme and that recur in the absence of immediate environmental demands requiring the thoughts". The literature identifies three styles of rumination. The first one is task-irrelevant; in this case, the individual distracts oneself by thinking about an unrelated aspect to the aversive event

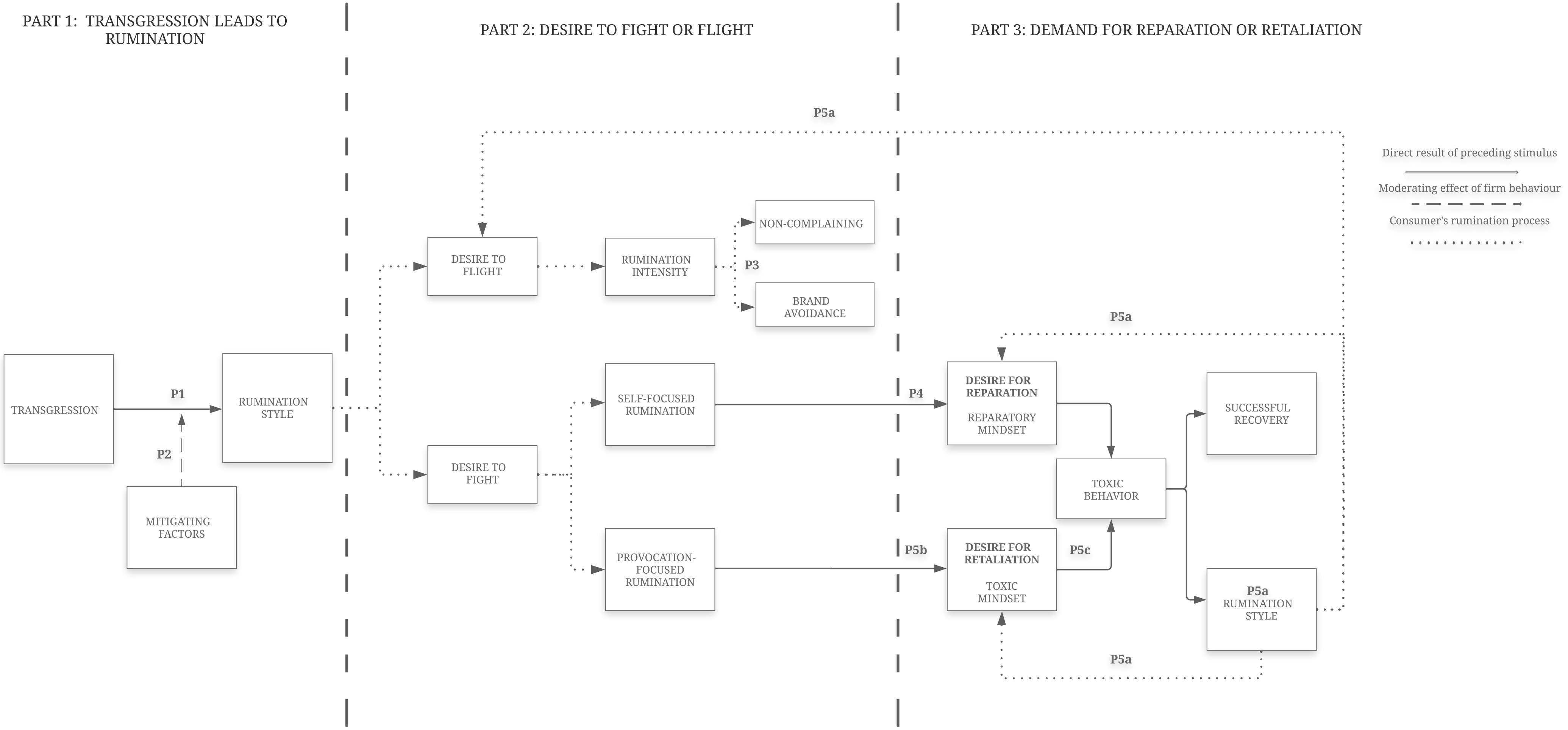
(Ciarocco, Vohs & Baumeister 2010; Denson, Pedersen & Miller 2006). Second, the individual can turn inwards, and focus on the self, thereby engaging in self-focused rumination. During self-focused rumination, an individual compares their current state with their personal standard, and if there is a discrepancy, they experience negative affect. This is followed by one's need to discuss the event with others and engage in emotional activities to relieve anger (Dickerson, Gruenewald & Kemeny 2004; Dickerson & Kemeny 2004). The third rumination style is provocation-focused rumination. One engages in provocation-focused rumination when one replays the anger-provoking incident and failed goal attainment in one's mind, and this may result in revenge and more aggressive feelings (Bushman et al. 2005; Denson, Pedersen & Miller 2006).

Rumination does not only have different styles, but also different intensities. There is generally no agreement on how many recurrent thoughts constitute intense rumination (e.g., Martin & Tesser 1996). However, research has established that repeating the same negative response, looking for alternative solutions, or renegotiating the desired goal can result in greater rumination intensity (Martin & Tesser 1996). Rumination style and intensity can trigger different negative behaviors in individuals (Beckman & Kellman 2004), such as anger relief, and vengeful and aggressive behavior. Drawing on the above arguments, I propose that rumination will drive whether the customer forms a desire for reparation and turns to constructive action, or a desire for retaliation, and turns to destructive action. If the customer engages in toxic behavior driven by destructive aims, such as to harm and revenge the firm, the customer has formed a *toxic mental state*. In contrast, if the customer decides to engage in toxic behavior driven by constructive aims, such as to initiate change, the individual has formed a *reparatory mental state.*

## A Process Model Of Customer Toxicity

My framework (see Figure 1) identifies the stages customers go through mentally before deciding on the action to take after a negative incident. The framework establishes the role of rumination in driving whether the customer engages in a fight or flight behavior. The next component distinguishes between these two tendencies and explores customers' mental state before deciding. A central premise of my framework is that customers may exhibit different toxic behaviors towards the firm at different points in time, driven by their underlying desires and mental state. The final component of the framework explores the consequences of these toxic behaviors on the firm and its performance.

Figure 1:Conceptual model and propositions


PART 1: TRANSGRESSION LEADS TO RUMINATION
PART 2: DESIRE TO FIGHT OR FLIGHT
PART 3: DEMAND FOR REPARATION OR RETALIATION
P5a
Direct result of preceding stimulus
Moderating effect of firm behaviour
Consumer's rumination process
NON-COMPLAINING
DESIRE TO FLIGHT
RUMINATION INTENSITY
P3
BRAND AVOIDANCE
P5a
TRANSGRESSION
P1
RUMINATION STYLE
P2
MITIGATING FACTORS
SELF-FOCUSED RUMINATION
P4
DESIRE FOR REPARATION
REPARATORY MINDSET
SUCCESSFUL RECOVERY
DESIRE TO FIGHT
TOXIC BEHAVIOR
PROVOCATION-FOCUSED RUMINATION
P5b
DESIRE FOR RETALIATION
TOXIC MINDSET
P5c
P5a
RUMINATION STYLE
P5a

To devise my framework, I rely on theory synthesis, which provides a "conceptual integration across multiple theoretical perspectives" (Jaakola 2020: 22) and can therefore help structure a fragmented field by analyzing it through a specific theoretical lens. Because the topic of toxic customer behavior is fragmented across different literatures, theory synthesis can help us identify and underscore commonalities that build coherence (Jaakola 2020). My theory synthesis study thus offers a new view of toxic customer behavior through linking previously unconnected pieces (marketing, aggression, and psychology literatures) in a novel way (through the lens of customers' mental state). I systematically review the literature on toxic customer behaviors as outlined in Table A1, along with the literature on rumination and aggression theory. I also include studies in the marketing and management literatures that look at managerial practices that address customer toxicity, along with consequences of customer toxicity. I refrain from reviewing the literature on other forms of transgression (e.g., product-harm crises, data breaches). This review was planned, conducted, and reported in adherence to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement (Page et al. 2021). Further details can be found in Table A4 and Figure A1 (Appendix A).

With these qualifications in mind, I searched 16 leading marketing and management journals and reviewed all issues from 1970 onward (published and online first articles) in the following peer reviewed English journals: *International Journal of Research in Marketing, Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Consumer Psychology, Journal of Retailing, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Marketing Science, Management Science, Marketing Letters, Psychology & Marketing, Journal of Service Research, Journal of Business Research, Journal of International Marketing, Academy of Management Journal, Academy of Management Review.* Next, I organize the key dimensions of customer toxicity. Finally, I synthesize the managerial implications across studies.

### *Part 1: Transgression leads to rumination*

Drawing on the frustration-aggression hypothesis, an aversive event (transgression) triggers expressive-motor reactions, such as emotions or cognitions (Berkowitz 1965). Negative emotions, accompanied by different cognitive evaluations (Anderson & Bushman 2002; Gelbrich 2010; Grégoire, Laufer & Tripp 2010; Graham et al. 2013; Kähr et al. 2016) determine the nature of customer behavior after a transgression. For instance, one may spread NWOM to facilitate change, or with the underlying mental state of harming the firm (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Grelmer 2004; Klein et al. 2004; Romani et al. 2013; Kähr et al. 2016; Rotman et al. 2017). NWOM can be preceded by different emotions, such as anger, hatred, or frustration (Gelbrich 2010; Romani et al. 2013; Wu 2010). Collectively, this body of research has illustrated that individuals engage in toxic behaviors with various *underlying motivations, induced by different cognitive reactions and emotions.* Table A2 (in Appendix A) provides a summary of the relevant literature on different emotional triggers behind toxic behaviors, while Table A3 (in Appendix A) summarizes the motives behind toxic behaviors.

However, the literature that identifies underlying emotions and cognitions driving toxic behavior does not explicitly answer the question of *how customers decide* to turn to either reparation or retaliation following the transgression. To investigate the mental process of customers driving this decision, I turn to rumination. Rumination occurs when an individual repetitively focuses on the negatives and the damaging features of a situation, such as the provocation incident or its impact on the self (Dickerson, Gruenewald & Kemeny 2004; Dickerson & Kemeny 2004). Rumination regulates emotions that arise in response to stress (Beckman & Kellman 2004), and different rumination styles can evoke negative behaviors towards the firm. For example, Denson, Pedersen & Miller (2006) found that provocation-focused rumination increases aggressive behavior, while Strizhakova, Tsarenko & Ruth (2012) found that rumination acts as a mediator of anger on negative WOM behavior. Building on the arguments of Beckman & Kellman (2004), Denson, Pedersen & Miller (2006), and Strizhakova, Tsarenko & Ruth (2012), I posit that rumination style will be a key determinant behind the type of behavior the customer engages in:

*Proposition 1: Rumination style influences the type of toxic behavior the customer turns to following an aversive event (transgression).*

I posit that even if a customer has formed cognitive and emotive responses following a transgression, firms can still avoid an adverse customer response and inhibit rumination. Management can mitigate the situation before the customer decides to fight. These mitigation strategies are outlined in Figure 2 and are further discussed in the managerial implications section. Lack of such initiatives can result in detrimental consequences. For example, if customers share their dissatisfaction online, negative emotions may be amplified, leading to more adverse actions (Lopez, Reimann & Castaño 2018). If the company cannot resolve the situation, they can face an even angrier customer. Customers can get emotional twice: once following the transgression, and once following the failed recovery. Consequently, customers can respond with more intense negative emotions and damage the customer-firm relationship (Valentini, Orsingher & Polyakova 2020). Any unresolved recovery attempt can prompt more intense emotions, such as rage, which can trigger more adverse customer behavior (Surachartkumtonkun, McColl-Kennedy & Patterson 2015).

I theorize that the driving mechanism behind such adverse customer behavior following a failed recovery lies not only in rumination, but also in its intensity. Existing research has established that repeating the same negative response, looking for alternative solutions, or renegotiating the desired goal results in greater rumination intensity (Martin & Tesser 1996). Failed recovery or amplified negative emotions can push customers to re-evaluate and ponder on the negative event multiple times, therefore increasing the intensity of their rumination. Research that measured rumination over a period of 25 minutes to 8 hours found that ruminating about a provocation increases the likelihood that even a minor trigger, such as annoyance at a situation, will turn to aggression (Bushman et al. 2005).

Although existing research has not yet established the role of rumination intensity on aggression (Martin & Tesser 1996), I posit that the more one repeats the same negative responses and provoking incident in their mind, the more intense their rumination will become, triggering a more aggressive reaction. Therefore, I propose that the more intense customers' rumination is, the more likely the customer is to turn to more toxic behavior. Thus, a failed recovery from the company, or amplified negative emotion can trigger more adverse reactions not just because of rumination, but more specifically, because of its intensity. Management should intervene and try to rectify the situation on time, to ensure rumination does not intensify. In accordance with the preceding discussion, I propose that:

> *Proposition 2: An unresolved incident can induce more adverse customer response because of rumination intensity.*

### *Part 2: Desire to fight or flight*

Customers do not always act against firms to harm them. Often customers do not react to transgressions at all. They may continue using the brand, or leave the firm and find a substitute product, without initiating a fight with the firm (Ro & Mattila 2015). And even in cases where customers react to a transgression, they may do so merely because they would like reparation (Joireman, Grégoire, Devezer & Tripp 2013), rather than with the explicit aim of damaging the firm (Kähr et al. 2016). In fact, most toxic behaviors are often motivated by more constructive, rather than destructive, retaliatory aims and active problem-solving (Kähr et al. 2016). I now turn to a discussion of the literature on customers' tendency to fight or flight (Day

& Landon 1977; Fornell & Wernerfelt 1987; Blodgett et al. 1997), which is important to understand customer toxicity.

Research has identified several different types of reactions to transgression, and different customer types: the noncomplainers, the satisfied, and the dissatisfied complainers (Voorhees & Brady 2005) – in other words, those who fight and those who flight. After a transgression, an individual can either not complain and continue buying from the firm, not complain but abandon the firm, complain and stay with the firm, or complain and exit (Fornell & Wernerfelt 1987; Blodgett et al. 1997). The literature has identified important moderators driving whether the customer fights the firm, or flights. First, *firm-specific factors* include the extent to which the firm facilitates customer complaints, which can lead to fight behavior, but consequently can also increase customer loyalty towards the brand (Umashankar, Ward & Dahl 2017). The rapport between the firm and the customer may also govern whether the individual decides to complain: higher rapport decreases complaint intentions and leads to higher post-failure satisfaction (DeWitt & Brady 2003). Whether the brand is perceived to be sincere or exciting can also impact customers' reaction to brand transgressions: customer-brand relationships suffer when a sincere brand violates a stimulus, but the relationship with an exciting brand can be reinvigorated after a transgression (Aaker, Fournier & Brasel 2004).

Second*, customer-specific factors*, such as a customer's attention to social comparison information may drive flight behaviors. Customers with higher attention to social comparison information experience higher uncertainty in terms of how others would react to their actions, hence may avoid complaint behavior (Kim et al. 2016). Furthermore, when customers' dissatisfaction after a transgression is minor, the customer may decide to flight, whereas one is more prone to fight when the incident induced major dissatisfaction (Richins 1983). Customers' involvement with the firm also influences their satisfaction levels; for instance, customers who are highly involved and experience a situation that gives rise to dissatisfaction with the core elements of the experience and product, report lower satisfaction levels overall than customers with low involvement (Goodman et al. 1995). Self-esteem may also govern customers' reaction; high self-esteem individuals are more prone to abandon the brand and switch; whereas low self-esteem customers stay with the brand quietly and exhibit a flight tendency (Consiglio & van Osselaer 2019). Customers with low emotional intelligence react more negatively to a transgression, because they attribute the negative emotions and associations directly to the brand (Ahn, Sung & Drumwright 2016). An individual's commitment towards the brand can also have an impact on switching or complaint behavior. When the transgression is serious, affective commitment will induce switching intentions. In contrast, a mild transgression experienced by a committed customer will not trigger a response (Ganesan et al. 2010). Moreover, financial constraint can reduce a customer's desire to fight and share his or her experiences with others (Paley, Tully & Sharma 2018).

Third, *event-specific* factors, such as a firm's recovery actions, may also drive fight or flight behavior. Customers who receive a dissatisfactory recovery are more negative, spread NWOM, experience purchase regret, and have lower level of repurchase intentions, than noncomplainers or complainers who receive a satisfactory recovery (Voorhees & Brady 2005). Whether the brand failure is experienced as part of a group or alone also tends to drive customers' post-failure intentions: customers experience more intense negative emotions and complaint intentions if they experience the negative incident in a group, rather than alone (Albrecht, Walsh & Beatty 2017). Transgression severity, the switching costs associated with the product or service, and the availability of alternatives as contextual variables can also influence an individual's response to a transgression (Beverland et al. 2010). In addition, monetary compensation can reduce customers' negative emotions and post-failure intentions (Valentini, Orsingher & Polyakova 2020). Reynolds & Harris (2009) highlight the importance of psychological obstructionism and personality traits driving the severity of dysfunctional customer behavior (Reynolds & Harris 2009). To sum up, whether the customer fights or flights is influenced by *firm, customer*, and *event-specific* factors. In addition to these, I also posit that rumination plays an important role. For example, the aggression literature has found that rumination can lead to a flight response and abandoning the goal (e.g., Denson, Pedersen & Miller 2006), as well as anger-relieving actions and revenge behavior (e.g., Dickerson, Gruenewald & Kemeny 2004; Dickerson & Kemeny 2004; Bushman et al. 2005; Denson, Pedersen & Miller 2006). I now explore these four different pathways considering the role of rumination, starting with the noncomplainers.

**Desire to flight.** Customers can, after the transgression, decide not to complain or engage in inactive or passive problem-solving. As rumination governs customer responses (Strizhakova & Ruth 2012), I posit that rumination and the firm-specific, customer-specific, and event-specific factors will guide whether the customer decides to flight. These non-complainers often do not reach out to the firm, are less negative than customers who fight, and may even stay with the firm over time, without ever engaging in a 'fight' behavior (Fornell & Wernerfelt 1987; Blodgett et al. 1997; Voorhees & Brady 2005). In contrast, some customers may decide to exit and leave without a fight; the literature defines these customers as avoiders; they avoid the firm because of a severe transgression. Such customers are unlikely to forgive and forget, choose to disassociate themselves from the firm altogether, avoid purchasing from the firm, and simply exit the relationship (McCullough et al. 1998; Bechwati & Morrin 2003; Grégoire & Fisher 2008; Fetscherin & Sampedro 2019).

I propose that whether one turns to brand avoidance or non-complaint is contingent on one's rumination style and its intensity. I argue that an individual who turns to a flight response does so as a result of task-irrelevant rumination: the individual distracts oneself by thinking about an unrelated aspect of the adverse event (Ciarocco, Vohs & Baumeister 2010; Denson, Pedersen & Miller 2006). Distraction can result in the customer forgetting about the event, and thus resulting in non-complaint. Alternatively, distraction can also increase the cognitive accessibility of the transgression and negative thoughts and trigger a more intense reaction (Wegner, Schneider, Carter & White 1987). I thus argue that the rumination style alone does not explain flight behavior, but one needs to look at the number of recurrent thoughts too (referred to as rumination intensity by Martin and Tesser 1996). Low rumination intensity explains the reason why noncomplainers are usually less negative and do not want to fight. Non-complaint is preceded by less negative emotions and cognitions, thereby making it easier to distract oneself and think about unrelated aspects to the aversive event. Thus, non-complainers may be less inclined to reevaluate the situation and ruminate less about the aversive event. On the other hand, brand avoidance is frequently preceded by a severe transgression (McCullough et al. 1998; Bechwati & Morrin 2003; Grégoire & Fisher 2008; Fetscherin & Sampedro 2019). As a severe transgression elicits more intense negative emotions and cognitions, it becomes harder to think about unrelated aspects to the aversive event (Kähr et al. 2016). As multiple rounds of task-irrelevant rumination can increase the cognitive accessibility of the transgression and remind customers of their negative emotions and cognitions, the customer is more likely to deliberately choose to reject the brand and leave the firm, rather than to stay with the firm over time (Lee, Motion & Conroy 2009). Therefore, I posit that flight behavior is preceded by task-irrelevant rumination, and while non-complainers do not ruminate about the aversive event intensely, brand avoiders tend to engage in intensive rumination:

*Proposition 3: The customer decides to turn to flight behavior after task-irrelevant rumination. Low intensity of task-irrelevant rumination is more likely to lead to non-complaint; high intensity of task-irrelevant rumination is more likely to result in avoidance behavior.*

As highlighted earlier, the aggression literature has found that rumination can also result in anger-relieving actions and revenge behavior (Dickerson, Gruenewald & Kemeny

2004; Dickerson & Kemeny 2004; Bushman et al. 2005; Denson, Pedersen & Miller 2006). If the customer decides to fight, we need to explore what makes a customer turn to either anger relieving actions to initiate change, or to revenge the firm. I explore this dilemma now.

**Desire to fight.** Prior literature has distinguished between customers who actively complain and leave the firm, and those who complain, but stay with the firm over time (Fornell & Wernerfelt 1987; Blodgett et al. 1997; Voorhees & Brady 2005). Customers who have a desire to fight the firm after a transgression can do so driven by a dominant desire for reparation or retaliation (Grégoire & Fisher 2006, 2008; Grégoire et al. 2009; Beverland, Lates, Lindgreen & Chung 2010; Grégoire et al. 2010; Joireman et al. 2013; Kähr et al. 2016; Grégoire et al. 2018). Research has widely studied the question of *why* customers harm a firm following a transgression (e.g., Sundaram, Mitra & Webster 1998; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Romani et al. 2013). A common theme emerging from the literature is that customers engage in toxic behaviors driven by various objectives. For example, customers can engage in *constructive punitive actions* (Romani et al. 2013), also referred to as *instrumental aggression* by Kähr et al. (2016) or *desire for reparation and reconciliation* by Grégoire & Fisher (2008) and Funches, Markley & Davis (2009). Customers typically engage in these punitive actions to inform other customers (altruism), to obtain an issue resolution (Lovelock & Wright 2002; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004), an apology or compensation, to be understood by the organization, or to initiate change (e.g., by providing feedback and suggestions*;* Romani et al. 2013; Whiting, Williams & Joe 2019).

In contrast, customers can harm the firm through *destructive punitive actions* (Romani et al. 2013), which the literature also refers to as *customer revenge behavior* (Obeidat, Xiao, Iyer & Nicholson 2017; Grégoire et al. 2010; Zourrig, Chebat & Toffoli 2009), *hostile aggression* (Kähr et al. 2016) or *retaliation* (Grégoire & Fisher 2008). The drive here is usually a desire to communicate negative feelings (to express the self), to harm the firm and damage its image, or to inflict financial hardship on the firm (vengeance). In addition, customers may also share negative reviews because of *self-serving functions, i.e.,* to communicate information about themselves, for example through impression management techniques, emotion regulation, information acquisition, social bonding, and persuasion (Berger 2014).

The drivers behind individuals' choice of reparation or revenge include a desire to make a difference, the perceived impact of their actions, their past experience with the firm, their levels of public self-consciousness and self-threat, their self-esteem, self-enhancement, and social norms (Sen, Gürhan-Canli & Morwitz 2001; Klein et al. 2004; Harris 2008; Johnson, Matear & Thomson 2011; Dunn & Dahl 2012; Philp, Pyle & Ashworth 2018). The perceived level of interest to the self and society, the costs associated with stepping up, and the perception of success can also drive one's propensity to engage in toxic behavior (Sen et al. 2001; Klein et al. 2004; Ahn, Sung & Drumwright 2016). In summary, existing studies have presented similar concepts for retaliatory or reparatory customer behavior. The literature has widely explored the question of *why* one engages in a toxic action against firms, and *what* kind of toxic behavior one engages in depending on their intent. However, there is scope to explore the mental state and thinking process of customers who engage in reparatory behavior or revenge, to understand what drives the extent of aggression customers exert against firms. More specifically, exploring customers' mental state can shed light on *how* customers decide to turn to a more (or less) aggressive behavior, and consequently, help develop managerial tools to prevent a transgression escalating and causing financial harm (see Figure 2).

### *Part 3: Demand for reparation or retaliation*

**Demand for reparation.** If the individual engages in reparatory behavior, the individual usually chooses an active path to problem solving—for example, reaching out to the organization online, on social media, through complaint procedures or legal action (Aquino, Tripp & Bies 2006; Grégoire & Fisher 2008). In these cases, the individual tries to solve a problem in an active, and not retaliatory manner. I propose that demand for reparation is preceded by self-focused rumination: an individual compares their current state with their personal standard or expectations, and if there is a large discrepancy, they experience negative affect. The negative affect, which is a pivotal driver of aggressive behavior (Anderson & Bushman 2002; Berkowitz 1993), leads to aggressive priming of the individual. Aggressively primed individuals who ruminate are more likely to react in an aggressive manner (e.g., Vasquez et al. 2013). Self-focused rumination results in one's need to discuss the event with others and engage in emotional activities to relieve anger (Dickerson, Gruenewald & Kemeny 2004; Dickerson & Kemeny 2004). Such behaviors can include, for instance, sharing their views and experiences on social media, or trying to initiate change by engaging others into the conversation:

*Proposition 4: Customers are more likely to form a desire for reparation if they engage in self-focused rumination.*

When a customer decides to demand reparation, the consequences may be three-fold: first, the recovery efforts are successful and exceed customers' expectations, potentially leading to a recovery paradox; second, the recovery efforts are successful and reset satisfaction, but do not exceed expectations; or, third, they are unsuccessful, resulting in recovery disconfirmation. A dissatisfied customer experiences a recovery paradox when their perception of the recovery performance is so great that they are more satisfied than if the transgression had not occurred in the first place. This heightened satisfaction state relative to pre-failure levels can increase loyalty and strengthen the social ties between the customer and the firm (Blodgett & Anderson 2000; Umashankar, Ward & Dahl 2017). Successful recovery may be the result of compensation or apology. For instance, monetary compensation can mitigate the effects of negative emotions, while communicating clearly with the customer and setting clear expectations can induce more positive emotions (You et al. 2020; Orsingher, Valentini & de Angelis 2010).

Successful recovery is also driven by *firm-based factors*, such as a customer's prior experience with the firm (Tax, Brown & Chandrashekaran 1998; Vázquez-Casielles, del Río-Lanza & Díaz-Martín 2007). The recovery strategy of a firm is also important. For example, shifting the focus away from blaming the firm and highlighting customers' contributions can increase customers' self-esteem and consequently their post-recovery satisfaction (You et al. 2020). Frontline employees also play a key role; if frontline employees over-display their positive affect and overdo relational work during the recovery efforts, customers' beliefs about the effectiveness of problem-solving decreases (Marinova, Singh & Singh 2018). Customers also experience higher post-failure satisfaction when they know that the employee behind the failure was reprimanded by management (Pugh, Brady & Hopkins 2018). Furthermore, firms may adjust their defense and recovery efforts depending on the purchase context. For instance, in case of a utilitarian purchase context, an accommodative recovery response works better than a defensive one, while in a hedonic context, a defensive response from the firm is more beneficial (Johnen & Schnittka 2019). In addition, firms may stress their positive motives (e.g., though apologies and compensation) to work towards more positive recovery efforts (Joireman et al. 2013).

*Customer-based factors* that determine the success of a recovery strategy include downward social comparison, whereby customers compare their experiences to others with a worse experience, hence viewing their own in a better light (Bonifield & Cole 2008; Antonetti, Crisafulli & Maklan 2018). A customer's interaction expectation (e.g., the ability to talk with an employee post-recovery) can also determine whether a firm's apology efforts are effective (Min et al. 2020). If the customer participates in the recovery efforts, their post-recovery satisfaction increases (Van Vaerenbergh, Hazée & Costers 2018). Also, customers tend to be satisfied with complaint handling if it is perceived to be just (Orsingher, Valentini & de Angelis 2010), and if the response to the failure is proportional to its magnitude (Smith & Bolton 2002).

*Event-based factors* can influence whether a firm's recovery efforts are successful, or if they result in recovery disconfirmation. For instance, the stability of cause influences the type of firm reaction the customer expects; if the cause is due to a stable cause (constant, not a temporary shortcoming or fault), customers tend to prefer a refund (Folkes 1984). Recovery efforts also need to be tailored to the market (Borah et al. 2020). The framing of the conflicting event also influences recovery effectiveness: the customer is more prone to be satisfied with the apology or economic restitution if the firm focuses on the events that lead to the failure (task-based framing of conflicts). Customers are less likely to be satisfied with an economic compensation when the focus is on the person at fault, rather than the events (personal-based framing style; Beverland et al. 2010).

If the customer demands reparation and engages in toxic behavior, but the firm's subsequent actions (e.g., apology or compensation) leads to recovery that exceeds expectations, and thus leaves the customer more satisfied than if the transgression had not occurred at all, the customer will experience a recovery paradox. However, it is important to note that customers tend to experience a recovery paradox only when they encounter a single case of failure. If customers are faced with multiple instances of failure from the same company, they will not experience a recovery paradox, even if the firm's recovery efforts are deemed extremely satisfactory by the customer (Maxham & Netemeyer 2002).

A transgression followed by an unsuccessful recovery leads to double deviation (Joireman et al. 2013; Grégoire et al. 2018). Such double deviation, or multiple cases of failure from the same firm, initiate a service recovery disconfirmation (Smith, Bolton & Wanger 1999; Smith & Bolton 2002; Chih, Wang, Hsu & Cheng 2012) and further levels of rumination. A customer can continue to think obsessively about the discrepancy between their current state and their personal standards, thereby engaging in another round of self-focused rumination (Dickerson, Gruenewald & Kemeny 2004; Dickerson & Kemeny 2004).

Rumination can initiate further negative behaviors toward the firm (Worthington 2006; Pronk, Karremans, Overbeek, Vermulst & Wignoldus 2010). Customers may start to think not just about the discrepancy between their current and desired state, but also about the transgression, its causes, and consequences (Nolen-Hoeksema 1991). Customers may start thinking about the anger-provoking incident, and how it made them feel, thereby triggering provocation-focused rumination. More specifically, provocation-focused rumination directs one's attention to the anger-provoking incident, increases self-reported anger, and can lead to planning aggressive acts of retaliation (Bushman 2002; Caprara 1986; Sukhodolsky, Golub & Cromwell 2001). Consequently, provocation-focused rumination triggers revenge behavior and more aggressive emotions (Bushman et al. 2005; Denson, Pedersen & Miller 2006). Alternatively, customers may, following rumination, decide to abandon their goal. Martin & Tesser (1996) established that rumination can only cease after goal attainment or abandonment. Following an unsuccessful recovery, when customers realize that they cannot attain their goal (e.g., free compensation, a new product, or an apology), they may decide to engage in task-irrelevant rumination and subsequently, abandon said goal.

Therefore, following an unsuccessful recovery, the individual will re-evaluate the situation and engage in another round of rumination. I posit that rumination style will prompt customers to decide whether to flight, or to fight. Following self-focused rumination, customers may decide to restore their well-being, and engage in reparatory behavior again, for example by further raising the issue with the firm, or by writing another review to initiate change (Cohen & Areni 1991; McCollough et al. 2000; Maxham & Netemeyer 2002; Gaab et al. 2005; Sembada et al. 2016; Kähr et al. 2016; Valentini et al. 2020). Customers may also decide to abandon their goal, and hence engage in a flight behavior following task-irrelevant rumination (Martin & Tesser 1996). If customers start to dwell on the anger-provoking incident and engage in provocation-focused rumination, more aggressive feelings, and consequently, a desire for retaliation may follow (Bushman et al. 2005; Denson, Pedersen & Miller 2006). As rumination can only be stopped by attaining a goal or abandoning the goal (Martin & Tesser 1996), I posit that the customer will engage in this spiral of rumination until they either attain their goal (i.e., obtain a recovery they deem appropriate from the firm), abandon the goal (flight), or alternatively, turn to aggressive behavior (Pedersen et al. 2011).

*Proposition* $5_a$*: Rumination style will determine whether the customer turns to reparatory or retaliatory behavior or decides to 'flight'.*

**Demand for retaliation.** If the customer starts to ruminate over the anger-provoking incident, the individual may turn to vengeful behavior with the explicit intention to harm and retaliate. Customers are also more likely to turn to revenge after a severe transgression or when they feel betrayed by the firm (Joireman et al. 2013). Aggression theory outlines that provocation-focused rumination results in more aggressive behavior (Pedersen et al. 2011). In such cases, I argue that customers form a toxic mental state with the intention to harm and take revenge on the firm. Revenge behavior can be twofold: direct revenge behavior directed at the firm, and indirect revenge behavior, performed behind the firm's back (Grégoire et al. 2018). In practical terms, direct revenge behavior includes customer complaints, stealing and sabotage, whereas customers who share NWOM, exaggerated NWOM or boycott engage in indirect revenge behavior. Drawing on aggression theory and the frustration-aggression hypothesis, when one chooses to fight, aggressive inclination emerges; an intention to be the one who gets back at the firm. Berkowitz (1989) argues that aggressive inclinations are cognitive and affective responses to negative affect, that may lead to exhibiting aggressive behaviors. Accordingly, I put forward the following proposition:

*Proposition 5$_b$: Customers are more likely to become toxic with the explicit intent to harm the firm following provocation-focused rumination.*

As previously argued, I denote all deliberate acts by customers directed at firms with constructive or destructive aims as toxic behaviors. Nevertheless, there needs to be a clear distinction in customers' mental state when they choose to engage in constructive or destructive actions. Customers with a reparatory mental state decide to engage in a toxic behavior when they have formed a desire for reparation following self-focused rumination. But what about a customer's mental state that drives a desire for revenge? I theorize that customers' mental state when they wish for retaliation is a toxic mental state. My definition of customer toxicity comprises four key elements. First, a "state of mind" which is one's mental state at a particular time (Collins 2022), and a "person's mood and the effect that mood has on a person's thinking and behavior" (Cambridge Dictionary 2022). The definition of state of mind implies that customer toxicity is an internal state at a particular point in time, and the effect that this internal state has on a customer's behavioral state is "toxic", i.e., potentially harmful towards firms.

Second, the word "toxicity" implies that a customer's action needs to be destructive or harmful. Toxic customers choose activities that they believe will get back at the firm. After all, a "poison" is "something destructive or harmful", therefore the toxic behavior a customer engages in, at the end of the day, needs to be able to harm the firm in some way (Merriam-Webster 2022). Therefore, customers who avoid the firm, do not complain, or engage in a toxic act driven by a reparatory mental state will not have a toxic mental state, even if the behavior they perform may be toxic. Third, customer toxicity is triggered by rumination arising from a transgression. Drawing on the frustration-aggression hypothesis, the presence of negative emotions following a transgression will not necessarily lead to toxic behaviors (Berkowitz 1989). These emotions may arise in a poor encounter with a firm, but do not necessarily induce aggressive actions from a customer. I argue that the presence of negative affect is pivotal for toxicity, but one must also ruminate on the anger-provoking incident (provocation-focused rumination) and consequently form an aggressive inclination to become toxic.

Thus, aggressive inclination is a key element of the construct of customer toxicity, which differentiates it from responses such as inaction, avoidance, and a reparatory mental state. The frustration-aggression hypothesis posits that a negative affect is followed by an aggressive desire before aggressive inclination is formed. Intention and desire are different constructs (Malle & Knobe 2001); an action begins with a desire and is followed by an intention before the action itself is executed. Whereas desire is not accompanied by a commitment to act, intention arises when one is committed to sticking with the choice they made (Bratman 1978; Mele 2000). Therefore, even if customers have a desire to harm, they do not have a toxic mental state if the aggressive intention is not present. For instance, one may be too apathetic to engage in toxic behavior or not committed enough to act. Alternatively, one may not have the required time and effort to engage in toxic behavior and intentionally harm the firm (Voorhees 2006). Prior research has shown that whether the customer perceives to have power over the firm (Gelbrich 2010) and the firm's responsiveness to harmful messages (Voorhees & Brady 2005) can govern whether one decides to act on a dominant desire to harm the firm. However, drawing on aggression theory, I posit that it is not important whether one causes harm and engages in toxic behavior for a toxic mental state to be present; it is the presence of the aggressive inclination that is pivotal for customer toxicity (Richardson 2014). With a clearer sense of the mental process of toxic customers, the firm may be able to inhibit the toxic behavior, by facilitating and helping in equity restoration, relying on well-targeted recovery efforts, or trying to stop rumination. It is important to note, however, that a customer can have a toxic mental state even if the customer does not engage in toxic behavior. Based on these arguments, I posit that:

*Proposition* $5_c$*: A customer is more likely to turn to toxic behaviors when, following provocation-focused rumination, the customer forms a desire for retaliation, followed by an aggressive inclination to act on that desire.*

## Contributions To Research

The main objectives of this chapter were to explore and enhance our understanding of customers' reactions to transgressions (and, thus, aid managerial responses to them), to understand customers' mental state when engaging in a vengeful action (and in doing so introduce the construct of customer toxicity), and to differentiate this toxic mental state from other related constructs, such as avoidance, constructive punitive actions, and non-actions. In line with these objectives, I have developed a conceptual framework of customer toxicity, and I contribute to the marketing literature at least in two key ways.

Firstly, I bring attention to processes through which customers can harm companies (Dietz et al. 2004; Liao & Chuang 2004). The existing literature has conceptualized the different negative behaviors, their antecedents and consequences, and the underlying emotions and cognitions in a disjointed, and surprisingly unconnected manner. I have offered a construct that brings clarity and integration to the existing body of work. In doing so, I have argued that whilst the aftermath of customers 'toxic' behavior may be the same, differences can lie in the role of rumination and customers' mental state. I have introduced the construct of customer toxicity, which denotes a deliberate and potentially harmful act of customers following a transgression, driven either by a reparatory or damaging mental state towards a firm. This new construct allows academics and practitioners to differentiate between customers' mental states before engaging in toxic actions and appreciate the difference between a *reparatory mental state* driven by constructive aims, and a *toxic mental state*, driven by retaliatory aims. With the rise of social media, and the emergence of fast-growing platforms, such as TikTok, understanding the mental state of customers will become increasingly important. Introducing the concept of customer toxicity highlights not only the need for a better and less fragmented understanding of customers mental state, but also invites future research to ascertain the role of rumination further (see Table 2). Subsequently, I differentiate customer toxicity from other related constructs outlined in Table 1. By introducing the concept of customer toxicity, I look beyond one type of harmful act (such as NWOM), and a single emotion or cognition driving that, to an overarching framework that helps understand the mental process customers go through when deciding whether to fight or flight (see Table A2 in Appendix A). I distinguish customer toxicity from similar concepts, such as customer incivility, deviant customer behavior or instrumental and hostile aggression (see Table 1 for further elaboration). I have shown that customer toxicity is a broader concept that (1) integrates the disjointed literature on different customer behaviors as a response to a transgression in a public manner, (2) combines the literature on brand avoidance, non-action, reparation and retaliation, and (3) introduces the mental processing of customers through the lens of rumination.

Second, I posit that customers' intention to harm a firm is driven by rumination style and rumination intensity. This model sheds light on customers' mental state before engaging in such behaviors, hence providing a novel insight to the marketing literature, and a fruitful area for future research (see Table 2 for future research directions). By highlighting this mental state, the framework provides a better understanding of when and why customers choose to exert toxic actions towards firms. I posit that customers stepping up against firms and harming them can be a result of task-irrelevant, self-focused or provocation-focused rumination that will drive the extent of aggression customers exert. By acknowledging that customers turn to destructive punitive actions because of their rumination style, I present an overarching framework that can help firms understand and address toxic behavior in the future. Discussion of future research questions is outlined in the 'Limitation and Future Research Directions' section and Table 2 below.

## Table 2: Future research directions

| Propositions | Suggested new research directions |
|---|---|
| Proposition 1: Rumination style influences the type of toxic behavior the customer turns to following an aversive event (transgression). | - Does a performance-based stimulus violation evoke the same intensity of rumination as a value-based stimulus violation (and vice versa)? |
| Proposition 2: An unresolved incident can induce more adverse customer response because of rumination intensity. | - Which emotions and cognitions evoke a more (vs less) intense rumination/ self vs. provocation-focused rumination?<br>- Do some emotions and cognitions evoke a more intense rumination than others?<br>- At what point does an emotion and cognition turn to rumination?<br>- How many consecutive rounds of rumination constitute an intense rumination? |
| Proposition 3: The customer decides to turn to flight behavior after task-irrelevant rumination. Low intensity of task-irrelevant rumination is more likely to lead to non-complaint; high intensity of task-irrelevant rumination is more likely to result in avoidance behavior. | - Which firm-, customer-, and event-specific factors trigger higher (vs. lower) rumination intensity?<br>- Can the firm reduce customer' rumination intensity, and thereby turn a potential brand avoider to a non-complainer? |
| Proposition 4: Customers are more likely to form a desire for reparation if they engage in self-focused rumination. | - Can the company stop self-focused rumination? If so, how?<br>- How intensely does one need to ruminate to turn to reparatory behavior?<br>- Is a customer more inclined to turn to self (vs. provocation-focused rumination)? Is self (vs. provocation-focused) rumination linked to customer personality traits and characteristics? |
| Proposition $5_a$: Rumination style will determine whether the customer turns to reparatory or retaliatory behavior or decides to 'flight'. | - How many times does the customer try to recover the situation through self-focused rumination and reparation?<br>- When does the customer turn to provocation-focused rumination from self-focused rumination?<br>- How can management encourage customers to abandon their goal and flight following rounds of rumination? |
| Proposition $5_b$: Customers are more likely to become toxic with the explicit intent to harm the firm following provocation-focused rumination. | - How many rounds of self-focused rumination result in provocation-focused rumination?<br>- When drives the customer to engage in provocation-focused rumination immediately after transgression?<br>- What drives the intensity of rumination in governing whether one turns to retaliation or reparation?<br>- Does more intense rumination push one towards a provocation-focused rumination faster? |
| Proposition $5_c$: A customer is more likely to turn to toxic behaviors when, following provocation-focused rumination, the customer forms a desire for retaliation, followed by an aggressive inclination to act on that desire. | - How many rumination rounds are necessary for the formation of retaliatory desire?<br>- Can the company inhibit the formation of a desire for retaliation, after the customer has started ruminating? |

## Managerial Implications

My study has several managerial implications. First, I highlight how firms may employ different preemptive and defensive strategies from the initial transgression through to toxic behavior. I show the importance of understanding customers' mental state at a particular time and identify the appropriate recovery effort to employ. For instance, management may offer a compensation or apology after the incident, or even once the customer has complained and engaged in reparatory behavior. Monetary compensation can mitigate the effects of negative emotions, and communicating clearly with the customer and setting clear expectations can induce more positive emotions (Schoefer & Diamantopoulos 2008; Valentini et al. 2020).

Besides reactive strategies, firms can also use preemptive approaches to minimize the potential incidence of toxicity, even in advance of an actual transgression. This may be achieved for example through the blemishing effect (Ein-Gar, Shiv & Tormala 2011), expectation management (Kopalle & Lehmann 2001; Diehl & Poymor 2010), inoculation (Compton & Pfau 2009; Ivanov & Parker 2011; Mikolon, Quasier & Wieseke 2015) and customer immunization (Merlo, Esingerich & Hoyer 2023). The blemishing effect, for instance, involves providing weak negative information about the product, firm, or service encounter prior to a transgression (Ein-Gar et al. 2011). Similarly, inoculation theory states that by confronting customers with a weaker form of negative argument, customers' cognitive defense strategy is stimulated. This way, customers can develop a defense mechanism against future attacks, such as a service failure (Mikolon et al. 2015), which could inhibit rumination. Expectation management can also act as a preemptive strategy; lowering customers' service-related expectations can lead to higher customer satisfaction post-failure (Diehl & Poynor 2010; Kopalle & Lehmann 2001).

Once an individual has formed an intention to harm a firm, the individual can also engage in toxic behavior. Opportunity may be impeded by distractions, time constraints, and complexity and amount of information (Hoyer & MacInnis 2010). For instance, the customer may be too distracted to engage in toxic behavior or is not committed enough to the cause itself to engage in action (Berkowitz 1989). For instance, frontline employees at the Ritz Carlton often use a simple practice of “resetting the clock” to distract customers when the service is slow or inefficient (e.g., waiters may provide an extra free appetizer, or an iPad for the kids). A toxic customer may decide not to engage in toxic behavior after all in case of successful recovery (Grégoire & Fisher 2008; Funches et al. 2009).

Second, proposition 1 suggests that rumination will influence the type of toxic behavior the customer turns to following a transgression. The literature has argued that a value-based violation (i.e., a transgression that goes against the moral stance of the customer) leads to more aggressive customer action and more harmful repercussions than those violations that are merely service-based, such as a service failure (Kähr et al. 2016). Looking at this finding through the lens of proposition 1-2, customers may respond more aggressively to value-based violations because of more intense rumination. Managers should therefore understand the role of rumination intensity and adjust recovery efforts accordingly. For instance, if I take the example of Starbucks, the firm experiences service-based failures frequently (such as a bad service experience). The company may address these basic complaints by replying to a tweet or responding directly to the negative review on different platforms. However, when Starbucks banned its employees from wearing attire advocating political, religious, and personal causes, it found itself in a middle of a firestorm and boycott. It was not enough to merely apologize to customers who spoke up against the firm. Starbucks had to issue a public apology, donate to an organization advocating the cause at hand, and issue T-shirts to employees with graphics that advocate the movement that prompted its ban on the attire in the first place (Aratani 2020). Therefore, management should respond to a value-based violation differently than to a performance-based transgression and ascertain customers rumination intensity in the first place. When it comes to value-based violations, customers may be ruminating more intensely, so recovery efforts that reduce rumination intensity need to be implemented. I propose that rumination intensity can be reduced by offering multiple recovery options to customers. Like Starbucks' response, I propose management can offer multiple recovery options to reduce rumination intensity (e.g., provide an apology, along with compensation, and communicate the specific ways in which the firm will address the incident). This way, management can forego another round of rumination that would be triggered by an inappropriate recovery.

Third, proposition 2 suggests that not resolving a customer incident can induce more adverse customer responses because of rumination. Companies can use social media tracking tools to identify unresolved incidents as early as possible. A study by Herhausen, Ludwig, Grewal, Wulf & Schoegel (2019) found that if management reacts to online toxic behavior timely, they may prevent it from escalating. If a firm responds to online tweets and comments before it gains adequate traction by fellow customers, it can offer an apology and/or compensation on time and avoid serious repercussions. To put this into perspective, Herhausen and colleagues (2019) showed that if a firm reacts to a negative review or comment after it has reached 6,600 likes, it is unable to contain the 'online fire'; however, if the firm manages to respond after the initial post only received 7 likes, this 'online fire' is put out quickly, before it has a chance to escalate. Fourth, propositions 1, 3 and 5 suggests that rumination style will determine the type of behavior customers engage in. Therefore, there is no silver bullet when it comes to dealing with customer toxicity: different solutions are effective depending on customers' mental state. For instance, management should not disregard customers who flight and engage in task-irrelevant rumination. Even if customers are trying to distract themselves from the transgression, multiple rounds of rumination can push non-complainers into brand avoiders. Understanding how many rounds of rumination the customer has engaged in can ensure management acts on time to retain their customers. Management could consider reaching out to those customers who have not been in touch after a severe transgression, provide an explanation and apologize. By turning attention to the customers who stay silent, management can ensure that non-complainers do not turn into brand avoiders over time.

If the customer has a toxic mental state, then an apology or compensation may not always be effective. For example, when United Airlines violently removed a passenger from their airplane due to overbooking, an apology and offering to reimburse every passenger's ticket on the flight was not enough to contain the online firestorm the incident generated. The recovery efforts should have been more substantial, considering customers' mental state at the time. Airlines such as United Airlines receive daily negative tweets from unsatisfied customers, to which they usually respond with a pro-forma tweet encouraging customers to contact the airline directly to solve the issue. Management should utilize online sentiment analysis tools to detect negative sentiment across platforms and respond to customers quickly and adequately. If the customer is complaining about the discrepancy between their current state and personal standard, they may be engaging in self-focused rumination and have a reparatory mental state. If the customer is reiterating the anger-provoking incident multiple times, they are likely to be engaging in provocation-focused rumination and have a toxic mental state.

Consequently, and in line with propositions 4 and 6, it is important for firms to carefully assess customers' mental state. For example, knowing that a customer is driven by a need for reparation, managers can ensure that the problem is adequately resolved in a timely fashion, and try to exceed expectations to trigger a service recovery paradox (Maxham & Netemeyer 2002). When customers share their opinion online to initiate change, signaling to customers that management takes their concern seriously, and is working towards a change, is important. Similarly, by understanding that in such cases, the customer is engaged in self-focused rumination, management can recover the situation by reducing the discrepancy between the customer's current state and personal standard. When the customer turns toxic, remedial actions also need to be adjusted. At this point, the customer is ruminating over the anger-provoking incident, so management should emphasize how it is addressing the root cause of the problem to reframe the anger-provoking incident in customers' minds.

Fifth, this chapter highlights the importance of the rumination process that drives customers' desire for reparation or retaliation. As highlighted in the propositions, understanding customers' mental state behind their actions can help managers respond appropriately (Silva et al. 2017, Cohen & Areni 1991). More specifically, it is important to understand that a failed recovery effort towards a customer who demands reparation may not always and immediately result in toxic behavior driven by a demand for retaliation; in some instances, customers decide to re-evaluate the situation, and try a different form of active problem-solving behavior (Cohen & Areni 1991). For instance, after a transgression, the customer may turn to complaint behavior with a desire for reparation; nevertheless, if the complaint behavior does not bring about the desired outcome, another round of self-focused rumination may prompt the customer to raise the issue through a more public medium, such as Twitter or a review site.

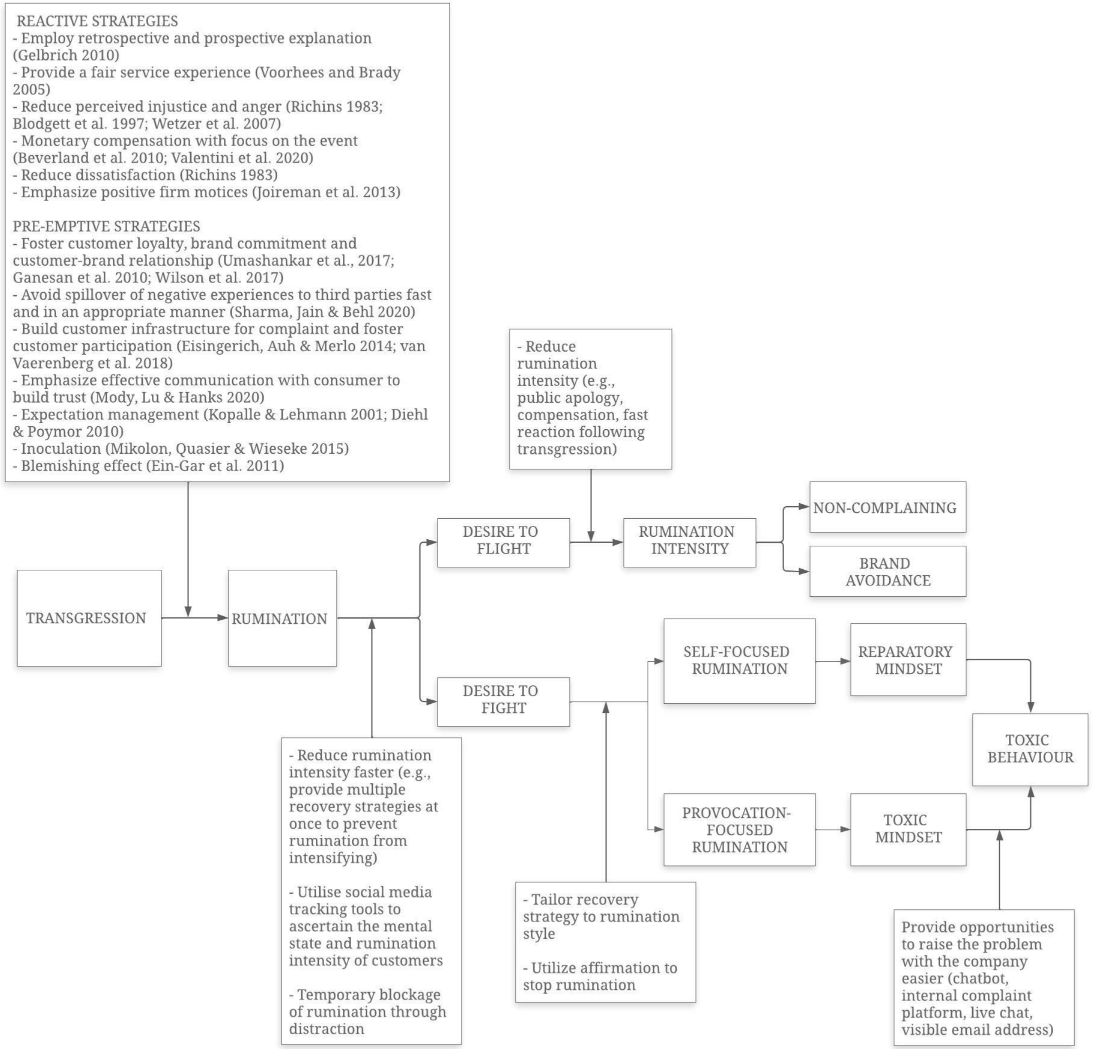
To put this into perspective, many reviews published by customers indicate that they have tried raising the same issue with the firm through their live chat or customer support already, without any luck, hence they turn to a more public medium. However, management needs to make sure they can grasp whether the customer is engaging in their first round of rumination or has started to ruminate more intensely. For example, management should look out for tweets or reviews that mention that the customer has raised the issue multiple times with the company. The customers who have engaged in more rounds of rumination are more likely to develop a toxic mental state. Following up with these customers through online review sites and offering a remedy directly can make sure the customer does not develop a toxic mental state and wish to take revenge on the brand.

Last, the question of how to stop ruminative thinking has been explored in the psychology literature (Beckmann 1994; Pyszczynski & Greenberg 1987; Wegner 1994). Rumination can cease through goal attainment, goal abandonment, and distraction (Martin & Tesser 1996). Goal attainment may be the most effective way of stopping rumination, yet in the context of transgression, a goal attainment is often outside of the customer's control, and in the hand of the firm at fault. Firms can increase the likelihood of goal attainment if they provide multiple ways for customers to complain. For example, having a chatbot support, a live chat option or a clearly signposted customer care number can ensure customers raise the issue with the firm directly, and hence ruminate less. Many companies still make the mistake of not disclosing an email address or phone number for the public to use for complaints. By making it harder to find the most appropriate way to contact the firm and attain a goal, customers may start ruminating more intensely. This suggests that developing effective channels for customer participation and engagement may help minimize toxic behavior (Eisingerich, Auh & Merlo 2014).

Rumination may stop when there is goal abandonment. However, as people ruminate about goals they perceive to be central to their well-being (e.g., a compensation from a firm, an apology, or a satisfactory service resolution), giving up said goal can result in a sense of losing one's identity (Wicklund & Gollwitzer 1982) and may evoke negative affect, such as frustration or even aggression (Klinger 1975). Koole and colleagues (1997) found that self-affirmation through substitution can also stop rumination. By affirming an important aspect of the self, one can reduce their failure-related cognitions. Companies often educate their sales-team to use positive scripting and affirm customers with sentences such as "I realize that this situation is difficult, but rest-assured we will find a solution for you" or "I would feel the same way if this happened to me. We will sort this out". By providing affirmation to customers, management can halt rumination.

If management cannot ensure that the customer attains (or abandons) their goal after the initial round of complaints, they could also try and "distract" customers. Martin & Tesser (1996) argued that distraction can relieve individuals from ruminative thoughts. However, the effect is only temporary, as the transgression itself is not addressed. Nevertheless, a temporary distraction by management could reduce the intensity of rumination (Martin & Tesser 1996). That is, temporarily blocking customers' negative thoughts may provide a distraction, and help reduce the intensity of rumination, thereby minimizing the likelihood of a customer turning to toxic behavior. For example, restaurants often provide customers with free drinks or appetizers, and luxury brands often provide customers with a free glass of champagne or coffee while waiting. The customer service community clearly believes in the distraction technique. By directing customers attention to something psychical and concrete, such as a computer screen, a brochure or file, customers' anger can be reduced (Bacal 2018). Figure 2 summarizes the managerial implications through the process model.

**Figure 2: Managerial recovery techniques**



REACTIVE STRATEGIES
- Employ retrospective and prospective explanation (Gelbrich 2010)
- Provide a fair service experience (Voorhees and Brady 2005)
- Reduce perceived injustice and anger (Richins 1983; Blodgett et al. 1997; Wetzer et al. 2007)
- Monetary compensation with focus on the event (Beverland et al. 2010; Valentini et al. 2020)
- Reduce dissatisfaction (Richins 1983)
- Emphasize positive firm motices (Joireman et al. 2013)

PRE-EMPTIVE STRATEGIES
- Foster customer loyalty, brand commitment and customer-brand relationship (Umashankar et al., 2017; Ganesan et al. 2010; Wilson et al. 2017)
- Avoid spillover of negative experiences to third parties fast and in an appropriate manner (Sharma, Jain & Behl 2020)
- Build customer infrastructure for complaint and foster customer participation (Eisingerich, Auh & Merlo 2014; van Vaerenberg et al. 2018)
- Emphasize effective communication with consumer to build trust (Mody, Lu & Hanks 2020)
- Expectation management (Kopalle & Lehmann 2001; Diehl & Poymor 2010)
- Inoculation (Mikolon, Quasier & Wieseke 2015)
- Blemishing effect (Ein-Gar et al. 2011)

- Reduce rumination intensity (e.g., public apology, compensation, fast reaction following transgression)

- Reduce rumination intensity faster (e.g., provide multiple recovery strategies at once to prevent rumination from intensifying)

- Utilise social media tracking tools to ascertain the mental state and rumination intensity of customers

- Temporary blockage of rumination through distraction

- Tailor recovery strategy to rumination style

- Utilize affirmation to stop rumination

Provide opportunities to raise the problem with the company easier (chatbot, internal complaint platform, live chat, visible email address)

TRANSGRESSION
RUMINATION
DESIRE TO FLIGHT
RUMINATION INTENSITY
NON-COMPLAINING
BRAND AVOIDANCE
DESIRE TO FIGHT
SELF-FOCUSED RUMINATION
REPARATORY MINDSET
PROVOCATION-FOCUSED RUMINATION
TOXIC MINDSET
TOXIC BEHAVIOUR

## Limitations And Future Research Directions

This conceptual framework is, by necessity, a simplification of a set of complex phenomena. At the same time, these complexities represent interesting avenues for future research. These avenues concern for example the process of rumination, the drivers behind a tendency to fight or flight, and the formation of aggressive inclination. First, the tendency to engage in a fight or flight response is a key factor in my model. However, further research could examine in more detail other relevant drivers behind the tendency to develop a fight or flight response and observe the boundary conditions and contingency factors behind these. For example, more work is needed to assess the underlying mechanism behind rumination; more specifically, how many failed rumination rounds trigger provocation-focused rumination following a failed recovery. Furthermore, the literature distinguishes between rumination style and rumination intensity, but I invite future research to look at both style and intensity driving different forms of toxic customer behavior. I hope that my framework can also inform future research on leadership and management style and encourage research to explore how management can structure organizations to address customers at the rumination stage before a fight tendency is developed.

Second, the process model shows that there are multiple pathways towards a toxic mental state. An individual may first want to initiate active constructive actions and engage in a toxic act with the underlying desire for reparation. However, one may still end up engaging in a toxic behavior with the underlying intention to harm and revenge if they start to ponder on the anger-provoking incident. Therefore, the process of rumination is a key construct of the process model that needs to be studied further. For instance, the literature does acknowledge the presence of rumination as a key driver behind the reappraisal process, but does not directly address its importance in driving toxic behaviors (Kähr et al. 2016). Hopefully, future research will be directed at examining the mechanism behind rumination and observing rumination intensity and style in driving toxic behavior.

Finally, a third interesting line of work pertains to combining the literature on aggression theory with the marketing literature. This is a particularly relevant issue for the process model and understanding of customer mental state before engaging in toxic behavior. Past research has suggested that an individual first forms a desire to fight, followed by an aggressive inclination (Berkowitz 1989). Nevertheless, Berkowitz (1989) claims that an aggressive inclination does not necessarily result in aggressive action. Just because a customer has developed a need for revenge, it does not automatically translate into toxic and aggressive behavior. Current research, however, does not explore this distinction in sufficient detail, and does not establish the factors that may influence whether one engages in toxic behavior, or just forms an aggressive inclination and does not engage in any further act. Clearly, this is an area that merits further attention. Table 2 outlines my proposed future research pathways in more depth.

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# Chapter 2:
# Examining the Role of the Deflation Effect: How to Reduce the Vengefulness of Negative Reviews

This chapter investigates whether, and if so why, the way consumer reviews are collected impacts consumers' likelihood to turn to vengeful behavior towards a brand. I propose that asking consumers to rate a negative experience first before fully reviewing it (as opposed to reviewing it first before rating it), decreases the vengefulness of the written review itself. This decrease occurs because of rumination refocusing: when disgruntled consumers rate various aspects of an experience before reviewing it, their rumination's focus is shifted away from the specific failure to the overall experience, leading to less vengeful (and potentially damaging) reviews. Using multiple methods, contexts, and studies, this chapter contributes to a body of research concerned with the way in which reviews may be collected to reduce harmful consumer behaviors and brand damage. It also contributes to the rumination literature—by shedding light on the importance of rumination following a transgression—and to the literature on the cessation of rumination—by establishing that refocusing rumination can reduce the impact of rumination on vengeful behavior. I then discuss the theoretical and managerial implications of my findings.

# Introduction

Reading online reviews and relying on other consumers' feedback is often seen as an effective way to acquire balanced information before a purchase. A recent study shows that 93% of consumers find online reviews useful before making a purchase decision (Kaemingk 2020). These reviews can also be beneficial to brands, by increasing a firm's visibility, improving consumers' trust and confidence in the business, and even boosting sales (Kirwin 2021). Consequently, encouraging consumers to leave reviews—whether on the firm's own platforms or on third-party review sites—is arguably a good idea for a business. Review sites normally collect consumer reviews in two ways. They either (1) ask one or more short questions first (e.g., a rating out of 5 stars) and then encourage a written review (I refer to this as "rating first", used by companies such as Booking.com and Deliveroo); or (2) ask consumers for a written review first, followed by one or more short questions (I refer to this as "review first", used for example by Google Review and Tripadvisor).

Unfortunately, while 56% of online reviews are usually positive, 41% are negative, and can have a profound impact on consumers' choice and experience (Kaemingk 2020). While a few negative comments have been suggested to provide a desirable blemishing effect, whereby exposing consumers to a small dose of negative information can make the firm appear transparent and boost the credibility of the positive reviews (Ein-Gar, Shiv, and Tormala 2011; Liu et al. 2015), many negative online reviews and low ratings may drive existing and potential consumers away. In particular, brands may be hurt by negative reviews left with the deliberate intent to harm the firm rather than to provide constructive criticisms. These reviews tend to receive more attention from fellow consumers, and can discourage others from approaching a brand (Hetler 2022). In fact, in a pilot study I show that vengeful reviews decrease individuals' intention to purchase more than non-vengeful negative reviews. Therefore, reducing the vengefulness of negative reviews is managerially important (Section BA1 in Appendix B).

The number of consumers who seek ‘revenge’ after a negative business encounter has tripled in the last 3 years (Deighton 2023). The National Customer Rage Survey found that the percentage of consumers who took vengeful action against companies, such as pestering and public shaming, increased from 3% to 9% in 2020 (Deighton 2023). Review-bombing—the act of posting negative user reviews to harm a company’s brand and sales—has become more prominent in recent years (Wordsworth 2019). For example, review bombing of books on Goodreads, movies on iMDB, and games on Amazon has resulted in significant losses of sales and profitability (Coleman 2023). Considering this, I ask: what can organizations do to ensure that when consumers express their opinion about the firm publicly, they are not driven by vengeful objectives?

The consumer complaint management literature has identified numerous factors that may help prevent vengeful customer behavior, such as offering a timely apology or free gifts, listening to consumers, acting empathetically, and making sure consumers feel heard (Bell and Luddington 2006; Stevens et al. 2018). However, besides reacting to the transgression with a reparative response, one might ask whether there is also a way to turn a consumer who is about to leave a vengeful review into a consumer who leaves a less damaging review instead. In this chapter, my goal is to investigate whether—and if so, why—the way in which ratings and reviews are collected impacts consumers’ likelihood to turn to vengeful behavior and post vindictive reviews. Specifically, I propose that when consumers are asked to rate a negative experience along a set of specific dimensions before leaving specific feedback (i.e., rating their experience first), their intention to turn to vengeful behavior decreases.

My reasoning is that this occurs because rating the experience shifts consumers’ rumination away from negative aspects. Rumination is a “class of conscious thoughts that revolve around a common instrumental theme and that recur in the absence of immediate environmental demands requiring the thoughts” (Martin and Tesser 1996, p. 1). It occurs when an individual repetitively focuses on the negative and damaging features of a situation. Repetitively elaborating on one's emotions and cognitions increases the number of rumination loops, and therefore the intensity of rumination. I argue that by slightly shifting the focus of rumination away from the perceived failure to other aspects (through a request to rate consumers' experience on a wide range of dimensions first before soliciting a thorough written review), the impact of rumination on vengefulness is reduced. Through a randomized controlled trial, observational data analysis, 32 in-depth interviews and six lab experiments, I confirm that rating an experience first leads to less vengeful written reviews. Building on the above arguments, the current chapter makes two main theoretical contributions.

First, by establishing that collecting ratings before reviews can reduce consumers' intention to turn to vengeful behavior, I contribute to the literature on managing negative reviews (Allard, Dunn and White 2020; Berger, Sorensen and Rasmussen 2010; Umashankar, Ward and Dalh 2017). While it may be difficult to discourage an unhappy consumer from writing a negative review (Liu et al. 2020), I suggest that at a minimum the firm can minimize the harm caused by these reviews by ensuring that they are not a vehicle for vengeful behavior. Thus, I shift the focus away from how to discourage negative consumer reviews (Liu et al. 2020), to highlighting instead how the way in which such reviews are collected may reduce vengeful behavior. More specifically, I show that collecting ratings before reviews can diminish consumers' inclination towards vengeful conduct and reduce the level of aggression expressed in their written reviews.

Second, I contribute to the rumination literature by shedding light on the importance of rumination as a driver of vengeful behavior (Martin and Tesser 1996; Kähr et al. 2016). I demonstrate rumination's impact on vengeful behavior in an online review setting, and show that the more intensely one ruminates, the more vengeful one becomes. In addition, I contribute to the literature on the cessation of rumination (Duffek, Eisingerich, and Merlo 2023; Klinger

1975; Koole et al. 1997; Martin and Tesser 1996) by providing new insights into how consumers' ruminative thoughts may be curbed (i.e., by shifting their rumination away from one specific transgression to a wider range of aspects of the experience), in order to reduce the vengefulness of their online reviews. This is a particularly important and novel insight, as existing research has not yet established how a third-party may actively reduce the impact of rumination on vengeful behavior (Klinger 1975; Koole et al. 1997; Martin and Tesser 1996).

From a managerial perspective, I contribute to managerial discussion on review-bombing and how businesses and platforms can generate less vengeful reviews (Deighton 2023; Wordsworth 2019). The current chapter identifies a powerful yet simple way in which managers may minimize the vengefulness of their customers' negative reviews: asking consumers to rate a negative experience along specific factors first may curb the impact of rumination on vengeful behavior. This is a managerially important and timely contribution, given the prevalence of vengeful reviews and their potential negative consequences for brands. Vengeful reviews can trigger further rounds of vengeful behavior (Obeidat et al 2022), resulting in review bombing (France 2023). They can have a negative impact on firm performance (Gopinath et al. 2014) and even affect stock returns and price (Luo 2007; 2009).

## Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

### *Goal Attainment Failure*

Several studies have examined the different stages of a consumer's mental state before engaging in vengeful behavior (see Chapter 1). The trigger is usually a transgression (i.e., negative firm-related stimuli that fall below a consumer's expectations and/or violate a consumer's values, e.g., Kähr et al. 2016). Companies may deal with such transgressions through different recovery efforts, such as apologies, gifts, or upgrades (Bechwati and Morrin 2003). Sometimes they successfully recover from the transgression, leading to consumer satisfaction (Boshoff 1999). Other times, however, the firm fails to deal with the fallout from a transgression effectively. For example, when it does not act quickly enough, does not offer a genuine apology, or when it disregards the situation altogether. Failed recovery attempts can further fuel consumer resentment.

I posit that it is goal attainment failure, more than the transgression per se, which determines whether one turns to aggressive behavior or not. Human thoughts and actions are generally goal directed (Austin and Vancouver 1996; Carver and Scheier 1981; Gollwitzer and Moskowitz 1996; Heckhausen 1991; Srull and Wyer 1986), i.e., individuals perform tasks to attain specific objectives. Following a transgression, a consumer may set out to achieve a desirable goal that recovers the situation and reinstates his or her satisfaction with the company. However, when this goal is not achieved, (e.g., because of a firm's failed recovery effort), consumers experience a gap between their current and desired end states.

Consider the case of Dave Carroll, a passenger on United Airlines, whose prized guitar was allegedly broken by the airline's baggage handlers. After that transgression, the musician asked for compensation in the form of $3,500, to replace his guitar (his desired end state). However, the airline turned down his request because Carroll's claim was not submitted within 24 hours (failed recovery). As a result, Dave Carroll recorded and published a protest song called "United breaks guitars" (a form of brand sabotage), which has since amassed more than 22 million views and 300,000 likes on YouTube alone. It has been estimated that the song cost United Airlines $180 million in just a matter of days, and the airline's stock price fell 10% (Carroll 2013). This example illustrates that it is often not the transgression itself that triggers one's propensity to engage in vengeful behavior, but the gap between the consumer's current state and the desired end state. Carroll had asked for a replacement guitar (desired end state), yet he was left with a broken guitar and no compensation (current end state), creating a discrepancy between the two end states, and prompting his vengeful behavior.

The discrepancy between the current state and the desired end state (such as a satisfactory service recovery, an apology from the company or the provision of compensation) gives rise to goal attainment failure. Such failure can lead to negative affect (Henkel and Hinsz 2004) and even consumer dejection and agitation (Higgins, Shah and Friedman 1997). Berkowitz's (1989) frustration-aggression theory suggests that frustration, in and of itself, does not result in aggressive inclination and vengeful behavior. Only if there is an interference with the attainment of an expected goal, does vengeful behavior follow. Thus, drawing on the frustration-aggression hypothesis, a transgression per se will not result in vengeful behavior; an interference in goal attainment tends instead to drive vengeful behavior. Accordingly, I advance the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis* $1_a$*: Consumers' vengeful behavior is preceded by goal attainment failure.*

Although the transgression per se does not trigger vengeful behavior, the severity of the transgression will also play a role in driving vengeful behavior. For example, Dave Carroll's guitar being broken by the airline is a more severe transgression than, for instance, a delayed piece of baggage. It also creates a larger discrepancy between the two end states, as a severe transgression represents a larger-scale failure that is harder to recover from. While companies can recover from milder transgressions with an apology, a refund or a compensation, companies often need to employ multiple recovery tactics for severe transgressions, thereby making the goal attainment process more cumbersome and difficult (Bechwati and Morrin 2003). I argue that a more severe transgression results in goals that are harder to achieve (Antonetti, Crisafulli, and Katsikeas 2020; Duffek, Eisingerich, and Merlo 2023), and thereby, a larger discrepancy between the current and the desired end state. Therefore, I hypothesize:

*Hypothesis* $1_b$*: A more severe transgression results in a larger discrepancy between the current and the desired end state.*

Some consumers, of course, are more willing to forgive and forget than others. The propensity to turn to vengeful behavior tends to vary according to personality traits. Research suggests that the Dark Triad (DT) set of personality traits, in particular, can help explain variations in behavior and why some people are more likely than others to go out of their way to intentionally harm a brand. The triad is comprised of three personality traits, namely Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, which can lead to exploitative behavior (Jones and Paulhus 2011; Satornino et al. 2023). People with Machiavellianism traits often turn to manipulation as an influence tactic, they are prone to lying and cheating (although often in secrecy), but do not engage in unconcealed antisocial behavior (O'Boyle et al. 2012). Machiavellians engage in transgressions with the primary aim to achieve their goals but avoid extreme deviance in the process (Santornino et al. 2023). People with narcissistic traits tend to be self-absorbed and extroverted, yet charismatic in social encounters, and often engage in socially undesirable behavior and exhibitionist impulses (Morf and Rhodewalt 2001; Rauthmann 2012; Santornino et al. 2023). Psychopaths exploit others towards their own goals, and do not feel remorse when their actions cause harm (O'Boyle et al. 2012). The psychology and personality literature has found that the presence of Dark Triad personality traits predicts hostility, physical and verbal aggression, as well as schadenfreude (Erzi 2020; Jones and Neria 2015), which may all be targeted at a brand after a transgression. As these three personality traits are known to cause severe transgressions and exploitative behavior, I propose that their presence may exacerbate the effect of goal attainment failure on vengeful behavior. Based on these arguments, I hypothesize:

*Hypothesis $1_c$: Consumers with a DT personality are more likely to engage in vengeful behavior after a goal attainment failure.*

### *Rumination*

Prior research suggests that consumers engage in an assessment and reassessment of the significance of the transgression, as well as their specific emotions (such as anger, frustration, outrage, hatred) and cognitions (e.g., hostile thoughts, identity threat, powerlessness, betrayal) following said transgression (Kähr et al. 2016). The constant appraisal and reappraisal of these emotions and cognitions leads to *rumination*, i.e., conscious and recurring thoughts revolving around a common instrumental theme (Martin and Tesser 1996). Rumination occurs when an individual repetitively focuses on the negative and damaging features of a situation. Ruminating individuals repetitively evaluate the meanings, causes and consequences of a transgression (Lyubormisky et al. 1999). They particularly tend to engage in ruminative thinking after having taken unsuccessful steps to reduce the discrepancy between their current and desired states. For example, a consumer who has demanded a refund following a service failure and has argued with service representatives without successful resolution, may engage in ruminative thinking as they relive the negative experience in their minds, and how infuriating it was.

According to self-regulation theory (Martin and Tesser 1989; 1996), the discrepancy between a current and desired state (goal attainment failure) prompts consumers to ruminate and engage in repetitive evaluation of the causes and consequences of negative affect (Nolen-Hoeksema 1991). Rumination regulates emotions that arise in response to stress (Beckman and Kellman 2004), and it evokes negative behaviors towards the firm. For instance, Strizhakova, Tsarenko and Ruth (2012) found that rumination acts as a mediator of anger on negative WOM behavior. The psychology literature has found a direct link between rumination and different forms of aggression, such as physical and verbal aggression and hostility (Anestis et al. 2009). Building on Beckman and Kellman (2004), Strizhakova, Tsarenko and Ruth (2012) and Anestis et al. (2009), rumination can drive aggressive behavior towards firms. Therefore, I posit that rumination will explain the process of goal attainment failure resulting in vengeful behavior. Accordingly, I hypothesize:

*Hypothesis* $2_a$*: Rumination mediates the relationship between goal attainment failure and vengeful behavior.*

Because consumers turn to vengeful behavior with the deliberate aim to harm and retaliate against a firm, Kähr and colleagues (2016) argue that vengeful behavior is preceded by multiple rounds of appraisal. Individuals engage in multiple rounds of primary appraisal and reappraisal, involving the evaluation and re-evaluation of their emotions and cognitions before they reach a decision on whether to turn to vengeful behavior. I posit that multiple rounds of appraisal result in greater rumination intensity: repeating the same negative response, looking for alternative solutions, or renegotiating the desired goal (Martin and Tesser 1996). In the behavioral psychology literature, someone who repetitively focuses on the negative situation, is preoccupied, fixated, and stuck on the topic is characterized as ruminating "intensively" (Kennedy et al. 2022). There is no consensus about how many recurrent loops constitute intense rumination, but perseverative discussion of the topic, racing around the topic, repeating the same concerns multiple times, using extreme language to describe the situation, and difficulty talking about other topics tend to characterize intense rumination.

Therefore, appraising and reappraising the transgression and elaborating on one's emotions and cognitions increases the number of rumination loops and the repetitive focus on the negative situations, and thereby, the intensity of rumination (Duffek, Eisingerich and Merlo 2023). Building on the arguments of Kähr et al. (2016), multiple rounds of reappraisal trigger more aggressive behavior. As multiple rounds of appraisal and reappraisal constitute more intense rumination, I posit that more aggressive behavior may ensue. I thus propose that the more intensely one ruminates, the more vengeful their behavior will be:

*Hypothesis* $2_b$*: More intense rumination will result in a more vengeful behavior.*

The question then arises as to under what circumstances goal attainment failure triggers (intense) rumination. I propose that whether a goal attainment failure triggers rumination will depend on the severity of the goal attainment failure. As a more severe transgression triggers a larger discrepancy between one's current and desired end states, this results in a more severe goal attainment failure as well. As argued earlier, these goals are harder to attain, and therefore individuals may ponder on them longer, resulting in multiple rounds of re-evaluation, and thus more intense rumination, where the consumer becomes fixated on the issue, thinks and talks about it frequently, often describing it in extreme negative terms (Kennedy et al. 2022). Therefore, I argue that the more severe the transgression, the larger the discrepancy it creates between one's current and desired end state, and thereby, the more intense rumination it triggers:

*Hypothesis* $2_c$*: A more severe transgression results in more intense rumination.*

### ***Reducing Vengeful Behavior by Shifting the Focus of Rumination***

Given the potential brand damage vengeful behavior can cause, an important managerial question is: how can the impact of rumination on aggression be reduced? Prior work has identified some ways in which rumination may be reduced (Beckmann 1994; Pyszczynski and Greenberg 1987; Wegner 1994). For example, the self-regulation model of ruminative thinking established by Martin and Tesser (1996) proposes that rumination can be ceased through goal attainment, goal abandonment, or distraction-focused rumination. Goal attainment (i.e., consumers getting exactly what they want when things go wrong) is arguably the most effective way to defuse rumination. However, in the context of transgressions, goal attainment is often outside of the consumers' control and in the hands of the firm—and even then, a frontline employee may simply not be able to provide goal attainment (e.g., because it is unfeasible or unreasonable, or because the employee has not been empowered to do so). An alternative way to reduce consumer rumination is through goal abandonment (i.e., the consumer just gives up). However, people often ruminate about goals they perceive to be central to their well-being (e.g., a compensation from a firm, an apology, a satisfactory service resolution), so giving up said goal can result in a sense of personal identity loss (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982). It can evoke negative affect, such as frustration or even aggression (Klinger 1975). In addition, achieving goal abandonment is often outside the firm's control.

The third strategy, distraction-focused rumination, may therefore be the simplest way to curb ruminative thoughts. In fact, evidence shows that shifting attention from the anger-provoking incident to other aspects may initiate distraction-focused rumination (Martin and Tesser 1996). This shift in rumination focus can decrease the impact of rumination on aggression. However, the refocus attempts must be subtle. Prior research has shown that obvious and deliberate attempts to shift consumers' focus from the failure may result in increased cognitive accessibility of said failure and negative thoughts (Wegner, Schneider, Carter and White 1987). In these cases, individuals end up distracting themselves with thoughts that are emotionally related to the ruminative thoughts, hence being reminded further of the initial goal attainment failure (Wenzlaff, Wegner and Roper 1988). When one is asked to think about other things than the goal attainment failure, one considers different data points that are linked to the mood state of when the experience occurred. Therefore, suppressed thoughts become linked to the mood state, bringing back similar negative experiences and memories, thus making the negative experience more salient (Wenzlaff, Wegner and Klein 1991).

Consequently, one should try to reduce the impact of rumination on vengeful behavior without making the negative experience more salient. As online reviews are one of the most prevalent channels through which consumers engage in aggressive behavior (Kähr et al. 2016), they can provide a subtle yet effective channel through which to refocus rumination. Consumers, I posit, are already ruminating when they are about to share a negative online review. They are likely to be reappraising their emotions and cognitions and reliving those negative experiences during the process. They might even be ruminating intensely about the negative experience (I call this failure-focused rumination). I suggest that the impact of rumination on aggression may be reduced by shifting the focus of rumination away from the focal negative element. This may be achieved by asking consumers specific questions pertaining to their experience with a wide range of product or service elements (e.g., indicate which elements of the service were satisfactory, which could have been better, and rate the product or service elements on a scale). By doing so, consumers' attention may be refocused slightly from the negative mood state towards other potentially positive or neutral elements of their experience. Doing so before soliciting a detailed review can shift the focus of rumination away from the failure, and may therefore reduce the impact of rumination on aggression (Bushman 2002).

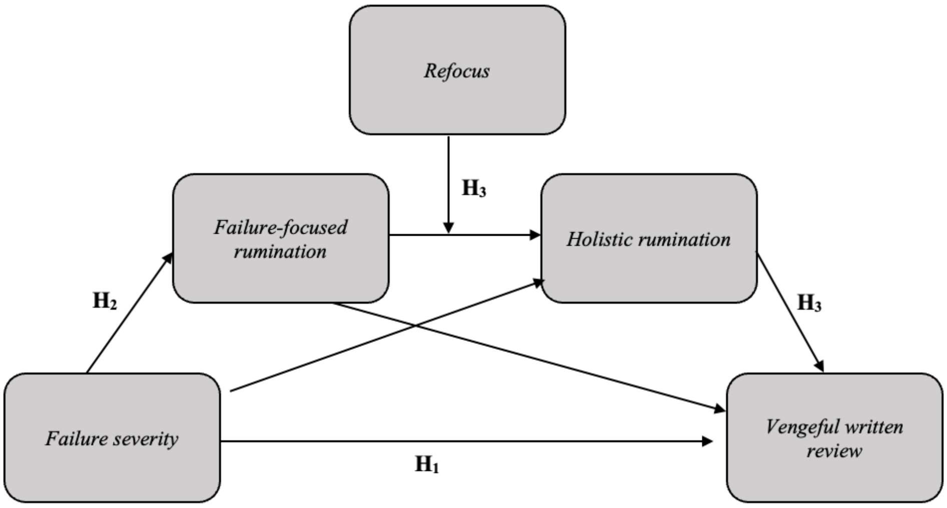
The underlying mechanism, therefore, is a refocus of rumination from the specific failure to the overall experience. By reminding consumers of positive or neutral elements of their experience, the company can create a subtle distraction that shifts consumers' attention away from a fixation on negative elements. Asking consumers to reflect on a wider range of factors first refocuses them from the perseverative discussion and reappraisal of the negative elements of the situation. It introduces some positive (or neutral) features of the experience that they may not have thought about. This refocus, I propose, will shift rumination away from negative elements to the overall service experience. Thus, I hypothesize:

> *Hypothesis 3: By asking consumers to rate their experience on different factors first before leaving an online review, their intention to turn to vengeful behavior will be reduced.*

### ***Conceptual Framework***

When consumers rate a wide range of elements first, they can still punish the brand (e.g., through a one-star rating), but I suggest that their subsequent written reviews will tend to be less vengeful. Even if the firm cannot minimize consumers' one-star ratings, at a minimum the firm might be able to minimize the damage that consumers' detailed reviews may cause the brand. Also, a low star rating alongside more constructive feedback may even provide a desirable blemishing effect, whereby exposing consumers to a small dose of negative information increases the brand's credibility and consumers' favorability towards it (Ein-Gar, Shiv, and Tormala 2011). I thus propose that rumination mediates the pathway from service failure severity to vengeful behavior. More specifically, the more intensely one ruminates, the more likely one is to turn to vengeful behavior. I also look at the role of personality traits driving vengeful behavior. Importantly, I propose that refocusing rumination reduces the impact of rumination on vengeful behavior, by shifting the focus away from the failure to the overall service experience. Figure 3 outlines the conceptual model.

**Figure 3: Conceptual framework**



### Studies Roadmap

To test my hypotheses, I conducted eight studies. In a pilot study (Section BA1 of Appendix B), I demonstrate that vengeful reviews have a direct negative impact on purchase intention, thus highlighting the managerial importance of reducing the vengefulness of written reviews. Study 1 examines the mediating role of rumination driving vengeful behavior following severe failure. Study 2 provides further evidence of the mediating role of rumination, and shows that rumination refocusing reduces the impact of rumination and its intensity on vengeful behavior. Study 3 offers correlational evidence of rumination refocusing through econometric analysis of scraped data and therefore provides a model-free evidence for the phenomenon. Study 4 shows the effects of rumination refocusing through a randomized controlled trial. Study 5 provides further evidence of rumination refocusing, and examines the role of DT personality traits in driving vengeful behavior. Study 6 analyzes failures with different degrees of severity and shows that rumination refocusing reduces the vengefulness of written reviews in case of less severe failures too. Finally, Study 7 provides evidence of the process mechanism and further support for the influence of rumination refocusing in a different business context.

### ***Study 1: Goal attainment failure results in vengeful behavior due to rumination***

The objective of study 1 was to examine the role of rumination in driving vengeful behavior, and thereby test $H_{1a}$ and the mediating role of rumination ($H_{2a}$). Study 1 also aimed to show that a more severe transgression triggers more intense rumination, in line with $H_{1b}$ and $H_{2c}$. I assigned participants to one of three conditions (high vs low severity transgression vs control condition; see Section BC1 in Appendix B for the study design). In the low severity condition, individuals were presented with a scenario where an online grocery delivery platform delivered the wrong side dish. When they reached out to the firm, they were offered a refund. The high severity condition presented the same failure, but the participants were told that the wrong order contained ingredients they are allergic to and tried to reach out to the firm through two channels without a successful resolution. In the control condition, participants did not experience a transgression, and received a free dessert with their order. Next, the participants responded to a set of items designed to measure all constructs of interest. Lastly, each participant was debriefed. During the debriefing, I informed the participants that the online grocery failure case was fictitious. I collected data from 282 MTurk workers. Eleven participants failed the attention check (by agreeing to the "I am a robot" statement). Thus, the final sample size comprised 271 participants (48.7% female, 49.8% male, and 1.5% preferred not to disclose). Participants were in the age groups 18-24 (4.4%), 25-34 years (29.2%), 35-44 years (49.4%), 45-54 years (9.6%), 55-64 (6.3%) and 65-74 (1.1%).

**Measures**

*Dependent Variable (DV).* The main DV was consumers' intention to engage in vengeful behavior, measured using the 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree") Likert scale developed by Grégoire et al. (2009): "I want to take actions to get the firm in trouble", "I want to punish the firm in some way", "I want to cause inconvenience to the firm", "I want to get even with the firm" and "I want to make the firm get what it deserves".

*Mediator.* Rumination was measured through Wade et al.'s (2008) rumination metric on a scale of 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"): e.g. "I can't stop thinking about how I was wronged by this company", "Memories about this company's wrongful actions have limited my enjoyment of life", "I have a hard time getting thoughts of how I was mistreated out of my head", "I try to figure out the reasons why this company hurt me", "The wrong I suffered is never far from my mind", "I find myself replaying the events over and over in my mind". As anticipated, participants in the high severity condition experienced a higher degree of rumination than participants in the low severity or control condition ($M_{highseverity}$= 3.72 vs. $M_{lowseverity}$ = 3.58 vs $M_{control}$= 3.07, $F(2, 268) = 12.992$, $p <.001$).

*Manipulation Checks.* Participants were asked to indicate "how severe they would describe the company's service failure presented above", 1 = "Not at all," 7 = "Very much so." A one-way (high vs moderate failure severity vs control) ANOVA on the manipulation check confirmed that the manipulation was successful. As expected, participants in the high severity condition viewed the notice as being more severe ($M_{highseverity}$ = 5.16) than those in the low severity or control condition ($M_{lowseverity}$= 4.86; $M_{control}$= 4.24, *F*(2, 268) = 9.442, *p* < .001).

*Control Variables.* Finally, participants provided the values of several control variables, including their likelihood of ordering groceries from online delivery providers, and how often they order such groceries. The controls did not impact the reported results and thus are not discussed further.

**Results**

*Effects of Failure Severity on Vengeful Behavior.* A one-way ANOVA with participants' intention to engage in vengeful behavior as the DV revealed a main effect of failure severity ($M_{highseverity}$= 3.70 vs. $M_{lowseverity}$ = 3.56 vs $M_{control}$=3.01, *F*(2, 268) = 14.236, *p* <.001), showing that an individual is more likely to engage in vengeful behavior after a severe failure.

*Rumination as a Mediator of the Failure Severity on Vengeful Behavior.* To test whether failure severity affects rumination and vengeful behavior, I used bootstrapping with repeated extraction of 5,000 samples (Hayes 2018, PROCESS v4.1 model 4). Specifically, the mediation analysis included rumination as a mediator of the relationship between failure severity, and intention for vengeful behavior. The severity of failure predicted rumination ($\beta$ = .3214, SE= .0664, t= 4.8422; *p* <.001, $CI_{95\%}$ = [.1907; .4521]). Further, rumination influenced vengeful behavior ($\beta$ =.8423, SE= .0353, t=23.8707, *p* < .001, $CI_{95\%}$ = [.7728; .9117]). The results show no significant direct main effect of failure severity on vengeful behavior ($\beta$ = .0722, SE = .0401; t= 1.8034; *p* =.0724, $CI_{95\%}$ = [-.0066; .1511]) suggesting that rumination fully mediates the relationship between failure severity and vengeful behavior.

*Discussion.* Study 1 shows that goal attainment failure (regardless of its severity) drives consumers' intention to engage in vengeful behavior, in accord with $H_{1a}$. Study 1 further shows that a more severe transgression triggers more intense rumination, in line with $H_{1b}$ and $H_{2c}$.

Moreover, rumination mediates the relationship between goal attainment failure and consumers' vengeful behavior, in support of $H_{2a}$. Study 1 findings therefore provide initial empirical evidence for the underlying process behind consumers' decision to engage in vengeful behavior by highlighting the mediating role of rumination. Tables BB1 and BB2 (in Appendix B) provide study measurement items, reliabilities, and means.

### *Study 2: Refocusing rumination reduces intention to engage in vengeful behavior.*

I conducted Study 2 to examine whether rumination intensity drives vengeful behavior, and thus provide evidence of $H_{2b}$, and to observe whether rumination refocusing reduces participants' intention to engage in vengeful behavior and thus provide preliminary evidence of $H_3$. Participants were presented with a service failure situation which they were asked to review. They were asked to either rate their experience first, before leaving a review, or vice versa (see Section BC2 in Appendix B for the study design). I used an online grocery delivery failure case as stimulus and recruited participants from MTurk. Four hundred and fifty-five MTurk workers participated in this study. Twenty-three participants failed the attention check (by agreeing to the "I am a robot" statement). Thus, the final sample size comprised 432 participants (46.2% female, 53.6% male, and .2% preferred not to disclose). Participants were in the age groups 18-24 (3.5%), 25-34 years (53.2%), 35-44 years (24.8%), 45-54 years (13.7%), 55-64 (4.6%) and 65-74 (.2%).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (rate vs review your experience first) in a one-way, between-subject design. Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to review a service offering. In both conditions, participants were told that an online grocery delivery service had delivered a wrong order, containing an ingredient they are allergic to. The platform did not offer a remedy, so the participants were asked to review their experience on the delivery platform. In the rating first condition, individuals were asked to rate their order first ("on a scale of 1-5 stars, rate the order and the individual items delivered"). They were then asked to write a written review of their order. In the review first condition, participants were first asked to write a written review, before rating their order. Next, the participants responded to a set of items designed to measure all constructs of interest. Lastly, each participant was debriefed. During the debriefing, I informed the participants that the online grocery service failure case was fictitious**.**

**Measures**

*Dependent Variable (DV).* The main DV was participants' intention to engage in vengeful behavior, measured through the scale developed by Grégoire et al. (2009).

*Mediator.* Rumination was measured through Wade (2008)'s rumination metric on a scale of 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). To measure rumination intensity, I median-split the rumination variable. When median-splitting the rumination variable, the independent samples t-test reveals that individuals who engage in low intensity of rumination exhibit a lower intention to engage in vengeful behavior than individuals who engage in high intensity of rumination ($M_{lowrumination} = 3.33$ vs. $M_{highrumination} = 4.16$, $F(1,430) = 12.127$, $p < .001$), showing that an individual is more likely to turn to vengeful behavior after high intensity of rumination.

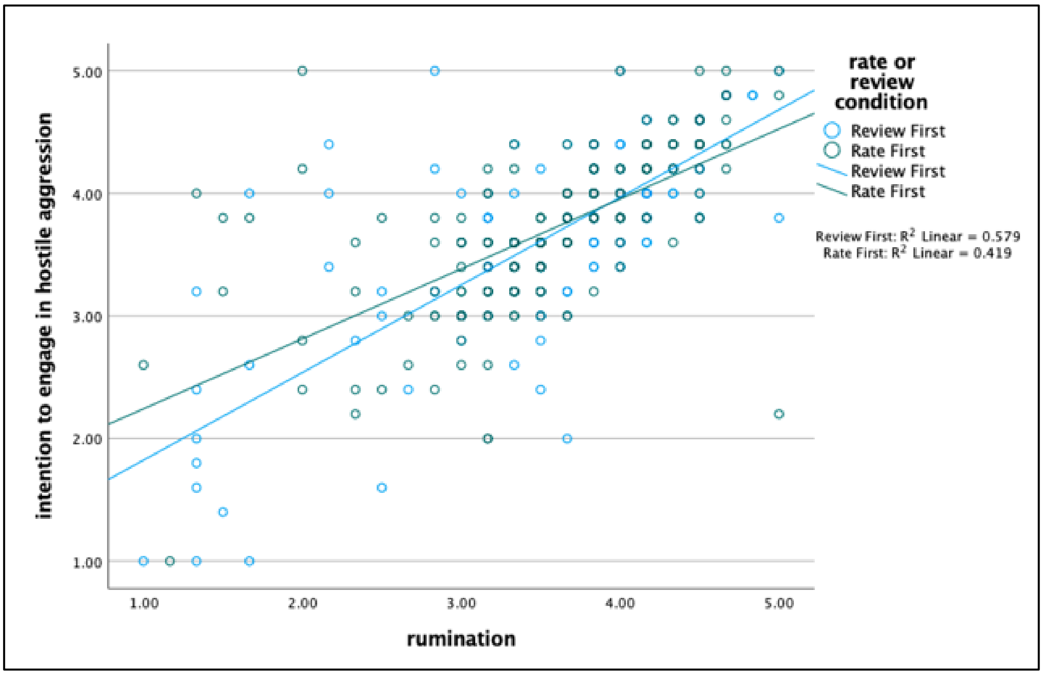
*Manipulation Checks.* Participants were asked to indicate whether "you rated your experience withs stars first, before writing a review", or "you wrote a public review about the order first, before giving a star rating to your order" on a scale of 1 = "yes," and 2 = "no." A one-way (rate vs. review) ANOVA on the manipulation check confirmed that the manipulation was successful. As expected, participants in the rate first condition indicated that they rated their experience before leaving a review ($M_{ratefirst} = 1.06$ vs. $M_{reviewfirst} = 1.24$; $F(1, 430) = 27.809$, $p < .001$). Similarly, participants in the review first condition considered to be asked about reviewing their order first, before rating it ($M_{reviewfirst} = 1.05$ vs. $M_{ratefirst} = 1.25$; $F(1, 430) = 39.622$, $p < .001$).

*Control Variables.* Finally, the participants provided the values of several control variables, including their likelihood of ordering groceries from online delivery providers, and how often they order such groceries. The controls did not impact the reported results and thus are not discussed further.

### Results

*Effects of Rumination on Intention to Engage in Vengeful Behavior.* To test whether rating or reviewing the experience first reduces the main effect of rumination on vengeful behavior, I used bootstrapping with repeated extraction of 5,000 samples (Hayes 2018, PROCESS v4.1 model 1). Specifically, the moderation analysis included rumination refocusing (rate vs. review first) as a moderator of the relationship between rumination and intention to engage in vengeful behavior. Rumination has a main effect on vengeful behavior ($\beta = .5708$, SE= .0450, $t = 12.69$, $p < .001$), and the interaction of rumination and rumination refocusing was significant ($\beta = .1440$, SE= 0.0619, $t = 2.33$, $p = .0205$, $CI_{95\%} = [.0223; .2658]$), showing that whether one rates or reviews their order first moderates the positive impact of rumination on vengeful behavior. More specifically, reviewing the negative experience first leads to a higher intention to engage in vengeful behavior ($\beta = .7148$, SE = .0426, $t = 16.786$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} = [.6311; .7985]$) than rating one's experience first ($\beta = .5708$, SE= .0450, $t = 12.59$, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%} = [.4824; .6592]$). A floodlight analysis (Johnson and Neyman 1936; Spiller et al. 2013) revealed that when rumination intensity is high, one has a higher intention to engage in vengeful behavior if they review their order first, as opposed to rating the order first (Figure 4). Tables BB3 and BB4 (in Appendix B) provide study measurement items, reliabilities, and means.

**Figure 4: Study 2 Floodlight Analysis**



*Discussion.* Study 2 demonstrates a main effect of rumination on vengeful behavior. More specifically, I find that rumination has a positive impact on intention to engage in vengeful behavior: the more intensely one ruminates, the more likely one is to turn to vengeful behavior, in support of $H_{2b}$. Study 2 also shows that whether one rates or reviews their order first moderates the relationship between rumination and vengeful behavior, offering initial support for $H_3$. The findings show that rating a negative experience first reduces one's intention to engage in vengeful behavior. The findings, therefore, provide empirical evidence for rumination refocusing decreasing the impact of rumination on one's intention to engage in vengeful behavior in a lab setting. I will now explore whether rating a negative experience first, before leaving a written review results in less vengeful behavior through analyzing the text of reviews.

### *Study 3: Does the sequence of rating vs. review first influence the vengefulness of written reviews? An observational data analysis.*

As noted, online platforms tend to collect review data in different ways. For instance, Booking.com collects ratings-based information first (rating first), before asking for a written review, while Tripadvisor solicits a written review before asking reviewers to rate various aspects of their experience (review first). To observe whether rating an experience first reduces the vengefulness of the subsequent written review, and thereby to provide another test for $H_3$, I analyzed publicly available observational data scraped from Tripadvisor and Booking.com (Alam, Ryu, and Lee 2016; Datafiniti 2016). The dataset contains information on the hotel (name and address), as well as the rating and review given to the hotel by the reviewer. Descriptive statistics can be found in Table BB5 (in Appendix B).

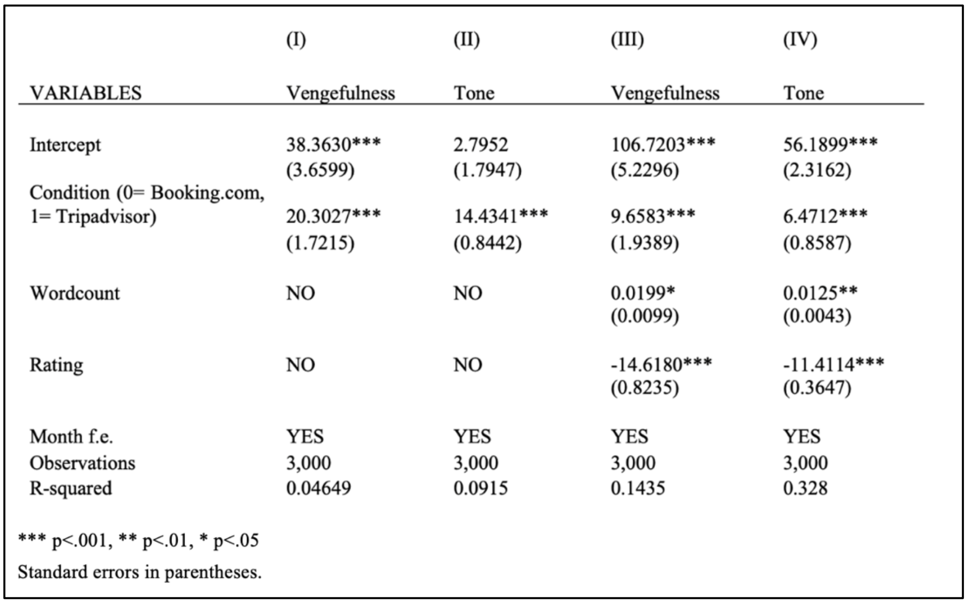
#### *Measures*

*Dependent variable.* I analyzed the vengefulness of the review through the natural language processing software LIWC. I also examined the tone of the review as coded in by LIWC22 (the higher tone value represents a more negative review). I developed a LIWC dictionary for vengefulness, that included the existing LIWC22 categorization of summary variables, including tone, negative emotions, anger, anxiety, sadness, as well as the use of personal pronouns, words indicating money, negation, power, differences and conflicts, needs, wants and acquisition. As a vengefulness dictionary was not yet available on LIWC22, the I generated words denoting vengefulness, including revenge, harm, hurt. Words indicating vengefulness were generated by screening in-depth interviews on consumers' experiences of vengeful behavior. More specifically, I conducted 32 in-depth interviews asking consumers to describe recent cases of transgressions and their reactions to these. This process follows steps 1-7 as recommended for LIWC dictionary development by Pennebaker et al. (2015). A full list of the new vengefulness dictionary words can be accessed in Section BE in Appendix B, and the summary variables can be accessed through the LIWC output variable information available from Pennebaker et al. (2015).

***Results***

Results show that rating an experience first makes the subsequent written review less vengeful, and less negative in tone (Table 3). More specifically, the reviews on Tripadvisor tend to be more vengeful, as well as more negative than reviews posted on Booking.com.

**Table 3: Study 3 Results**



|  | (I) | (II) | (III) | (IV) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| VARIABLES | Vengefulness | Tone | Vengefulness | Tone |
| Intercept | 38.3630*** | 2.7952 | 106.7203*** | 56.1899*** |
|  | (3.6599) | (1.7947) | (5.2296) | (2.3162) |
| Condition (0= Booking.com, 1= Tripadvisor) | 20.3027*** | 14.4341*** | 9.6583*** | 6.4712*** |
|  | (1.7215) | (0.8442) | (1.9389) | (0.8587) |
| Wordcount | NO | NO | 0.0199* | 0.0125** |
|  |  |  | (0.0099) | (0.0043) |
| Rating | NO | NO | -14.6180*** | -11.4114*** |
|  |  |  | (0.8235) | (0.3647) |
| Month f.e. | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 3,000 | 3,000 | 3,000 | 3,000 |
| R-squared | 0.04649 | 0.0915 | 0.1435 | 0.328 |

*** $p<.001$, ** $p<.01$, * $p<.05$
Standard errors in parentheses.

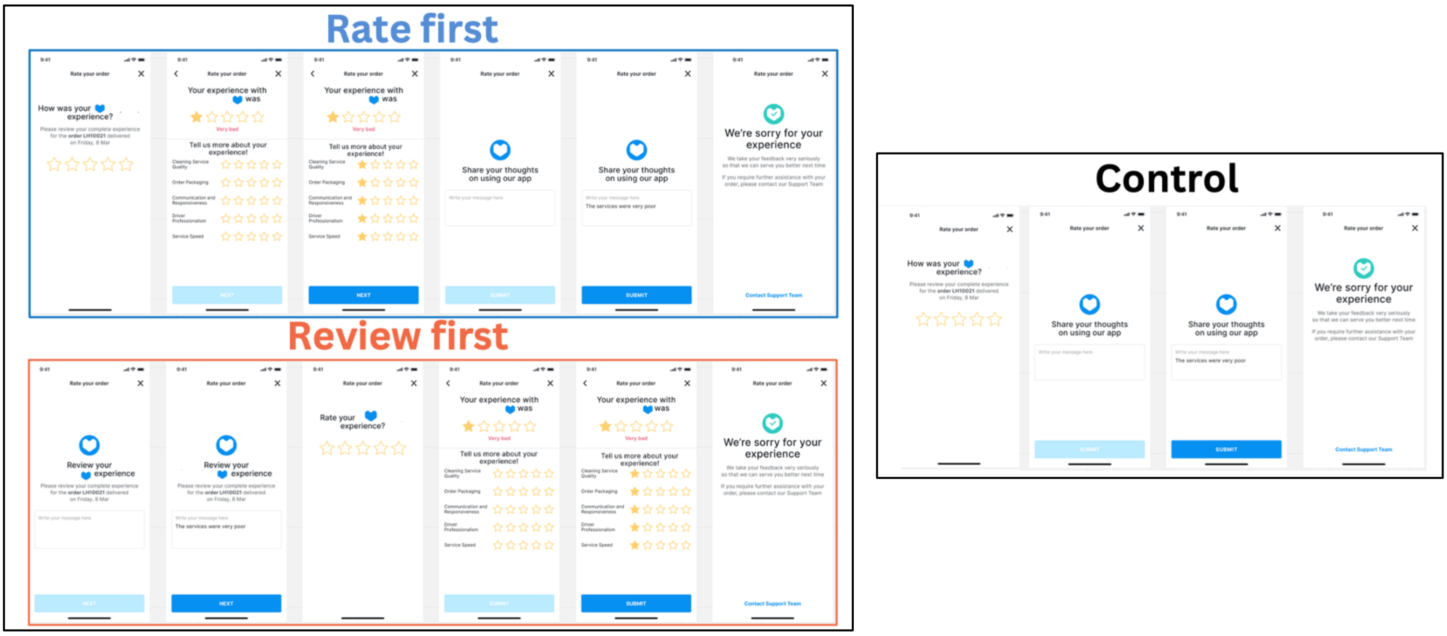
*Discussion*. Study 3 demonstrates that the main effect of the booking platform (Booking.com and Tripadvisor) was significant in all four models, indicating that consumers on average left a more negative review (in terms of the tone of the review), as well as a more vengeful review on Tripadvisor than Booking.com ($H_3$). Thus, Study 3 provides model-free evidence that the order of reviewing an experience matters when it comes to one-star reviews. In addition to the main effect of platforms, both the number of words in the review, and the star rating had a significant effect on the vengefulness and tone of review. More specifically, the higher the star rating of the review, the lower the vengefulness and the negative tone of the written review itself. I also observed a significant null-effect of the number of words used in a review on the vengefulness of the written review. These effects were expected and demonstrated the face validity of the results.

### *Study 4: Field study involving a randomized controlled trial with a mobile app*

To provide further support for $H_3$, I collaborated with a global on-demand laundry and dry-cleaning app. Over a period of eight weeks I conducted a field experiment and manipulated how reviews were collected in the UK, USA, France, Singapore, and the Netherlands. In a randomized controlled trial (RCT, pre-registered at AsPredicted #139597, https://aspredicted.org/9MQ_3DF), consumers were randomly allocated to one of three conditions (rate first; review first; control; see Figure 5). In the rate first condition, participants were asked to rate their experience first, before reviewing it, while in the review first condition, participants were asked to leave a written review of their experience first, before rating it on various factors. Participants in the control condition only rated their experience with stars, and then left a review (they did not rate various factors of their experience).

*Dependent Variable (DV).* 522 one- or two-star reviews were collected in the given timeframe. The vengefulness of the written review was coded in manually by me and a research assistant. A negative review that displays vengefulness was coded in as 1, and 0 otherwise. The interrater agreement, Cohen's Kappa, between the two coders was .769, indicating a substantial agreement (McHugh 2012). Disagreements were resolved together within the research team.

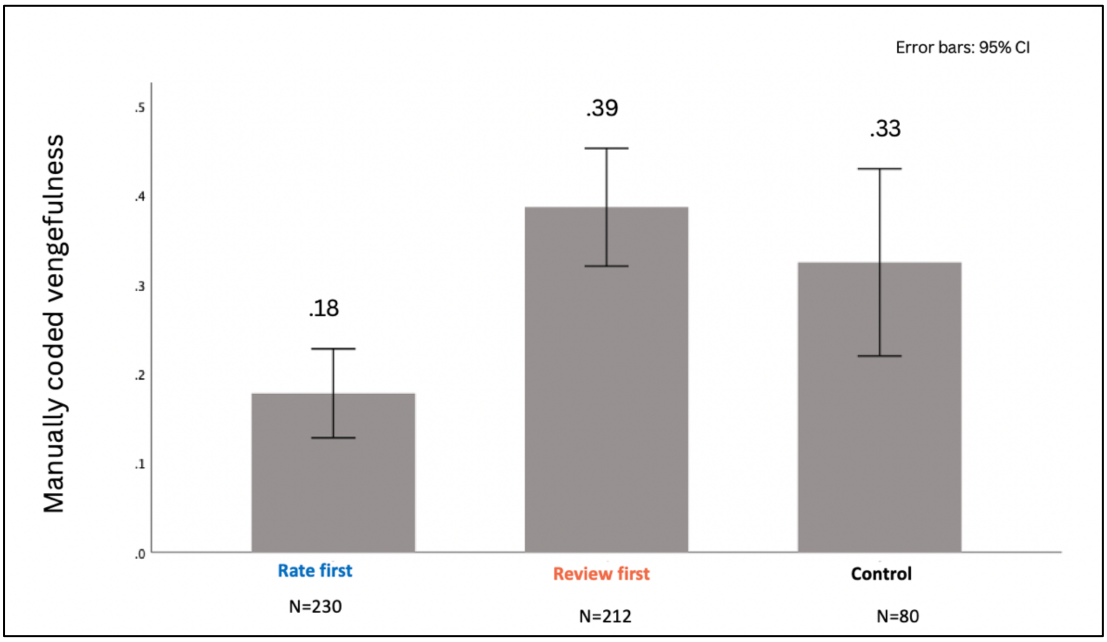
**Figure 5: RCT manipulation**



### *Results*

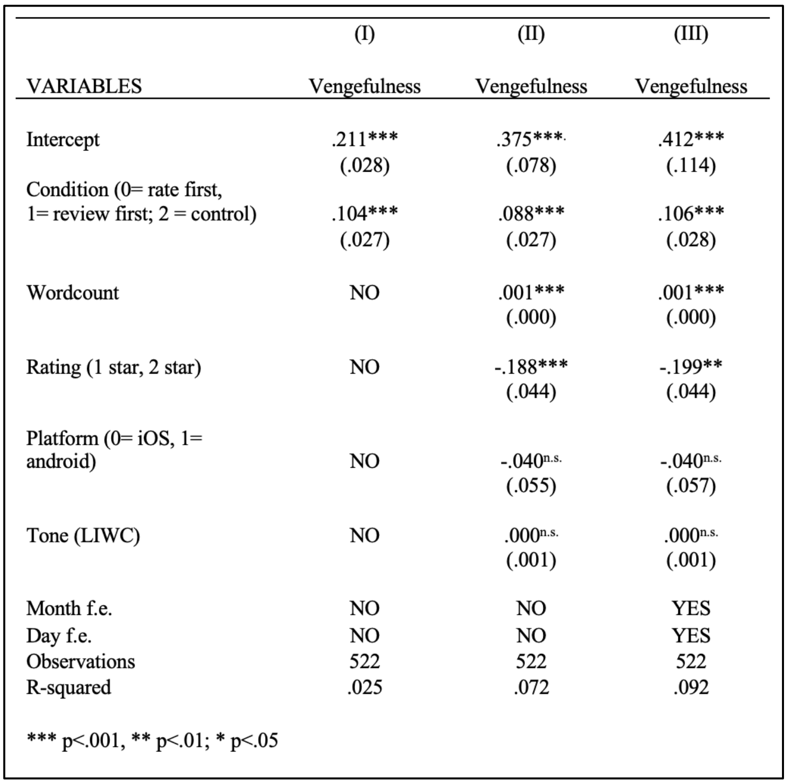
*The Influence of Refocusing on Vengeful Behavior.* In support of H3, the results demonstrated that participants who engage in rating first leave a less vengeful review than those participants who leave a review first, or rate their experience with stars only ($M_{ratefirst}$ = .18 SD = .38 vs. $M_{reviewfirst}$ = .39, SD = .48 vs. $M_{control}$ = .33, SD = .47; $F(2, 519) = 12.640$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .046$; Figure 6).

**Figure 6: RCT Vengefulness results**



As outlined in Table 4, the results show that rating an experience first made the subsequent written review less vengeful, controlling for the wordcount, the star rating, the platform, as well as the tone of the review.

**Table 4: Study 4 Results**



| | (I) | (II) | (III) |
|---|---|---|---|
| VARIABLES | Vengefulness | Vengefulness | Vengefulness |
| Intercept | .211*** | .375***. | .412*** |
| | (.028) | (.078) | (.114) |
| Condition (0= rate first, 1= review first; 2 = control) | .104*** | .088*** | .106*** |
| | (.027) | (.027) | (.028) |
| Wordcount | NO | .001*** | .001*** |
| | | (.000) | (.000) |
| Rating (1 star, 2 star) | NO | -.188*** | -.199** |
| | | (.044) | (.044) |
| Platform (0= iOS, 1= android) | NO | -.040$^{n.s.}$ | -.040$^{n.s.}$ |
| | | (.055) | (.057) |
| Tone (LIWC) | NO | .000$^{n.s.}$ | .000$^{n.s.}$ |
| | | (.001) | (.001) |
| Month f.e. | NO | NO | YES |
| Day f.e. | NO | NO | YES |
| Observations | 522 | 522 | 522 |
| R-squared | .025 | .072 | .092 |

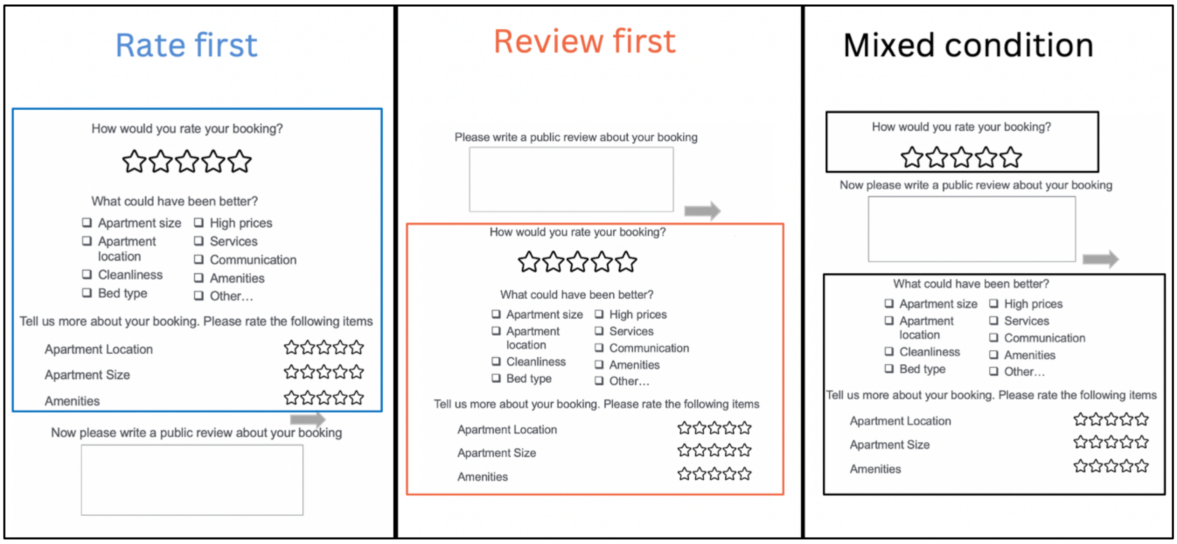
*** p<.001, ** p<.01; * p<.05

*Discussion*. Study 4 provides field evidence that the order in which consumers' ratings and reviews are collected matters when it comes to one- or two-star reviews ($H_3$). More specifically, the main effect of refocusing was significant, indicating that consumers on average leave a less vengeful review when they are asked to rate various aspects of their experience first.

### *Study 5: Rumination refocusing reduces vengefulness of written review*

In the previous studies, I demonstrated that rating a negative experience first reduces one's intention to turn to vengeful behavior in both a field and lab setting. In study 5 (pre-registered at As-Predicted.org, AsPredicted #127190, https://aspredicted.org/HK4_NQS), I establish whether the sequence of the rating matters. More specifically, I add a third condition, wherein individuals rate their negative experience on the star scale first, before they leave a negative review (see Figure 7). I thus aim to provide further support for $H_3$ showing that rumination refocusing stems from rating individual aspects of an experience. Furthermore, I aim to ascertain whether participants' personality traits have an impact on vengeful behavior, thus providing evidence of $H_{1c}$.

**Figure 7: Study 5 Rating Manipulation**


Rate first
How would you rate your booking?
☆☆☆☆☆
What could have been better?
❑ Apartment size
❑ Apartment location
❑ Cleanliness
❑ Bed type
❑ High prices
❑ Services
❑ Communication
❑ Amenities
❑ Other…
Tell us more about your booking. Please rate the following items
Apartment Location ☆☆☆☆☆
Apartment Size ☆☆☆☆☆
Amenities ☆☆☆☆☆
Now please write a public review about your booking
Review first
Please write a public review about your booking
How would you rate your booking?
☆☆☆☆☆
What could have been better?
❑ Apartment size
❑ Apartment location
❑ Cleanliness
❑ Bed type
❑ High prices
❑ Services
❑ Communication
❑ Amenities
❑ Other…
Tell us more about your booking. Please rate the following items
Apartment Location ☆☆☆☆☆
Apartment Size ☆☆☆☆☆
Amenities ☆☆☆☆☆
Mixed condition
How would you rate your booking?
☆☆☆☆☆
Now please write a public review about your booking
What could have been better?
❑ Apartment size
❑ Apartment location
❑ Cleanliness
❑ Bed type
❑ High prices
❑ Services
❑ Communication
❑ Amenities
❑ Other…
Tell us more about your booking. Please rate the following items
Apartment Location ☆☆☆☆☆
Apartment Size ☆☆☆☆☆
Amenities ☆☆☆☆☆

Participants were presented with a transgression with a serviced apartment provider, which they were asked to review (see Section BC3 in Appendix B for the study design). One thousand nine hundred and eighty MTurk workers participated in this study. One thousand and eighty-three responses were excluded, 175 participants failed the attention check (participants agreed to the question of "I am a robot" statement), and 908 participants wrote a written review that was not directly related to the prompt (for instance, they described a good book they recently read, or provided a review from a review aggregator, etc.). Thus, the final sample size comprised 897 participants (40.2% female, 59.2% male, .2% nonbinary, .4% preferred not to say). Participants were in the age groups 18-24 (4.1%), 25-34 years (62.7%), 35-44 years (20.4%), 45-54 years (7.9%), 55-64 (3.9%) and 65-74 (1%).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (rating first; review first; mixed condition; Figure 7) in a one-way, between-subject design. In all conditions, participants were told that they booked a stay at a serviced apartment and did not receive the room they paid for (the room had fewer beds and did not match the description of the booking platform). After having complained, they were not offered a remedy, so the participants were asked to write a public review of their booking. The manipulation was pre-tested on MTurk, and participants indicated the service failure example to be severe (M = 4.81; "on a scale of 1-7, how severe would you rate the above service experience"). In the rate first condition, individuals were asked to rate their order first ("How would you rate your booking"). They were then asked to write a written review of their experience. In the review first condition, participants were first asked to write a written review, before rating their experience. In the mixed condition, participants were first asked to rate their experience on the scale of 1-5 stars, then write a written review, and only then review the individual factors of their experience. Next, the participants responded to a set of items designed to measure all constructs of interest. Lastly, each participant was debriefed.

### ***Measures***

*Dependent Variable (DV).* Intention to engage in vengeful behavior was measured on the same scale as in the previous two experiments (Grégoire et al., 2009). Furthermore, I also measured the vengefulness of written reviews on a scale of 1-5. The vengefulness of the written review was coded in manually by me and a research assistant. The interrater agreement, Cohen's Kappa, between the two coders was .759, indicating a substantial agreement (McHugh 2012). Disagreements were resolved together within the research team.

*Mediator.* Rumination was measured using Wade et al.'s scale (2008; $\alpha = .835$). I also coded the intensity of rumination following the approach of behavioral psychologists (e.g., Kennedy et al. 2022; Schumm et al. 2022). Rumination score between the values of 0-2 indicate low rumination, values between 2-3 indicate mild rumination, values between 3-4 show moderate and values between 4-5 indicate intense rumination.

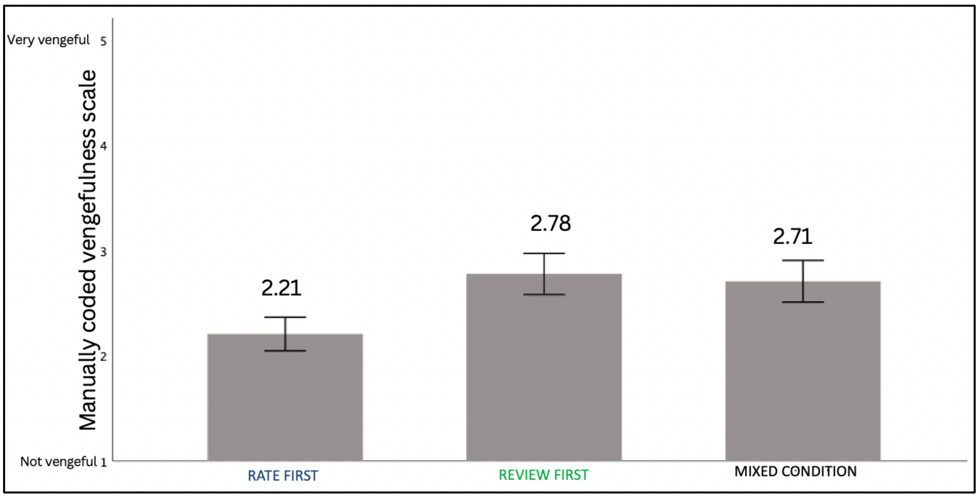
*Manipulation Checks.* A one-way (rate vs. review) ANOVA on the manipulation check confirmed that the manipulation was successful. As expected, participants in the rating first condition indicated that they rated their experience before leaving a review ($M_{ratefirst}$ = 1.01 vs. 1.36; $F(2, 894) = 131.176$, $p < .001$), so did participants in the mixed condition ($M_{mixed}$ = 1.03 vs. 1.40; $F(2, 894) = 131.176$, $p < .001$). Similarly, participants in the review first condition considered to be asked about reviewing their order first, before rating it ($M_{reviewfirst}$ = 1.07 vs. 1.37; $F(2, 894) = 48.230$, $p <.001$).

*Control.* Participants' frequency of booking serviced apartments had a significant main effect on individuals' intention to engage in vengeful behavior (β = -.032, $F(7, 889) = 69.573$, SE = .013, $t = -2.531$, $p = .012$), but their likelihood of booking such service did not influence their intention to engage in vengeful behavior (β = -.007, $F(7, 889) = 69.573$, SE = .014, $t = -.472$, $p = .637$). Nevertheless, controlling for frequency of booking a serviced apartment did not impact the results, and hence is not discussed further.

***Results***

*The Influence of Refocusing on Vengeful Behavior.* I analyzed the vengefulness of written review as a function of the review collection manipulation. Providing further support for $H_3$, I found that participants who engage in rating first leave a less negative review than those participants who leave a review first, or rate their experience with stars first ($M_{ratefirst}$ = 32.29, SD = 42.83 vs. $M_{reviewfirst}$ = 39.91, SD = 43.93 vs. $M_{mixed}$ = 39.89, SD = 44.16; $F(2, 894) = 3.166$, $p = .043$, $\eta^2_p = .007$). I found the same effect when looking at the manually coded vengefulness scale too ($M_{ratefirst}$ = 2.21, SD = 1.467 vs. $M_{reviewfirst}$ = 2.78, SD = 1.69 vs. $M_{mixed}$ = 2.71, SD= 1.69; $F(2, 894) = 11.655$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .025$; Figure 8). The star-rate of the experience is similar across conditions ($M_{ratefirst}$ = 3.28, SD = 1.31 vs. $M_{reviewfirst}$ = 3.06, SD = 1.32 vs. $M_{mixed}$ = 3.11, SD = 1.32; *F*(2, 894)= 2.381, *p* = .093, $\eta^2_p$ = .005).

**Figure 8: Study 5 Vengefulness results**



To test whether rating or reviewing the experience first reduces the main effect of rumination on one's intention to engage in vengeful behavior, I used bootstrapping with repeated extraction of 5,000 samples (Hayes 2018, PROCESS v4.1 model 1). The results replicate the findings of study 2. Rumination (*β* = .5735, SE = .0344, *t* = 16.6498, *p* < .001, $CI_{95\%}$ = [.5059; .6411]), as well as the review condition has a direct main effect on participants' intention to engage in vengeful behavior (*β* = -.3517, SE= .1053, *t* = -3.3392; *p* < .001, $CI_{95\%}$ = [-.5584; -.1450]), and the interaction of rumination and rumination refocusing was significant (*β* = .0922, SE = 0.0271, *t* = 3.4056, *p* = <.001, $CI_{95\%}$ = .0391; .1453]), showing that whether one rates or reviews their order first moderates the positive impact of rumination on one's intention to engage in vengeful behavior. More specifically, reviewing the negative experience first (*β* = .6657, SE = .0228, *t* = 29.1421, *p* < .001, $CI_{95\%}$ = [.6209; .7105]), or reviewing the experience immediately after leaving a star review, increases the impact of rumination on vengefulness to a larger extent (*β* = .7579, SE = .0364, *t* = 20.8384, *p* < .001, $CI_{95\%}$ = [.6209; .7105]) than rating one's experience first (*β* = .5735, SE = .0344, *t* = 16.6498, *p* < .001, $CI_{95\%}$ = [.5059; .6411). When replicating the results using rumination intensity as the focal predictor

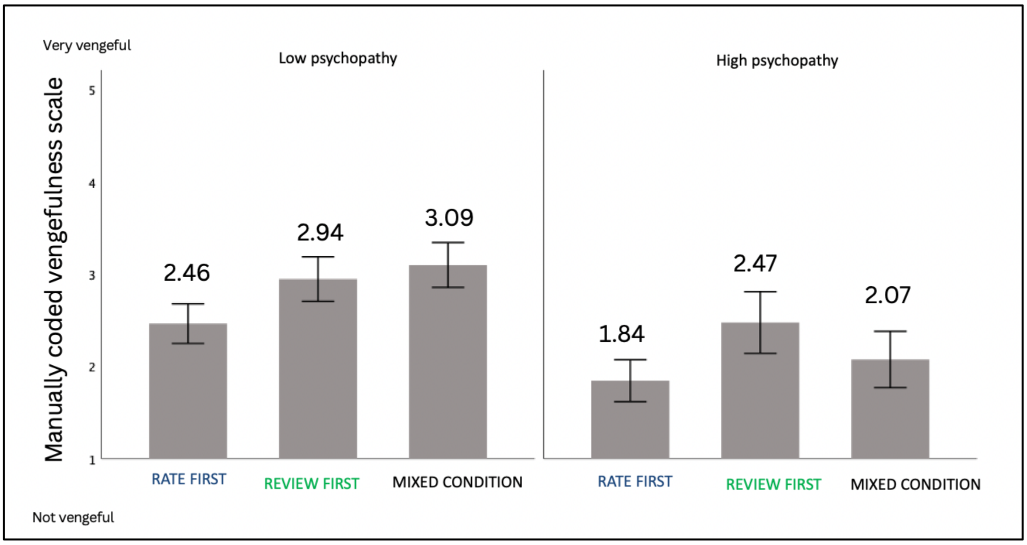
($\beta$ = .5044, SE = .0361, $t$ = 13.9641, $p$ <.001, $CI_{95\%}$ = [.4335; .5753]), I found a significant interaction effect, indicating that the impact of both rumination and intense rumination on consumers aggression can be reduced through rumination refocusing ($\beta$ = .0826, SE = .0281, $t$ = 2.9381, $p$ < .01, $CI_{95\%}$ = [.0274; .1378]).

Next, I aim to answer whether participants' personality traits have an impact on vengeful behavior, in order to test $H_{1c}$. Results reveal a significant main effect of psychopathy (β = .109, $F$(7, 889) = 69.573, SE = .024, $t$ = 4.450, $p$ < .001), but not Machiavellianism (β = .025, $F$(7, 889) = 69.573, SE = .025, $t$ = .998, $p$ = .318) and narcissism (β = .035, $F$(7, 889) = 69.573, SE = .024, $t$ = 1.461, $p$ = .144) on participants' intention to engage in vengeful behavior, indicating that individuals with some psychopathic traits may be more inclined to engage in vengeful behavior following a transgression. I found evidence of a significant interaction of rumination and psychopathy, indicating that psychopathy acts as a further moderator on the relationship between rumination and intention to engage in vengeful behavior (β = .7620, SE = .1600, $t$ = 4.7637, $p$ < .001, $CI_{95\%}$= [.4481; 1.0760]).

After median-splitting the psychopathy variable, I find that individuals with low psychopathy traits are more inclined to write a vengeful written review than individuals with high psychopathy traits. These effects may be surprising, as I would have expected individuals with high psychopathy traits to leash out at the firm and engage in vindictive behavior. There is a possible explanation for that. The psychopathy questionnaire, adapted from Satornino et al. (2023), contains information on individuals' sensitivity and cynicism ("I sometimes lack remorse", "I can be insensitive at times", "I can be cynical at times" measured on a 1-7 Likert scale). Individuals who score lower on the psychopathy score may simply be more sensitive, and thus get more upset about a failure than those who score high on those measures, potentially explaining their tendency to write a more vengeful review.

Nevertheless, in both cases, rating the negative experience first reduces the vengefulness of written reviews for individuals with psychopathy traits too. Therefore, while marketers cannot directly influence the personality traits of consumers, I find that refocusing rumination can reduce aggression amongst individuals with psychopathy traits too (see Figure 9). Tables BB6 and BB7 (in Appendix B) provide study measurement items, reliabilities and means, while Tables BD1 and BD2 (in Appendix B) provide the results of the moderation analysis.

**Figure 9: Vengefulness of written review across psychopathy traits**



*Discussion.* Study 5 offers further support for $H_3$: rumination refocusing reduces the impact of rumination, as well as of rumination intensity, on vengeful behavior. Furthermore, Study 5 shows that the most effective way of collecting written reviews is to ask for ratings first. Contrary to $H_{1c}$, I found that psychopathy has a significant main effect on driving vengeful behavior, but the other two dark triad personality traits do not. Thus, these findings suggest that in general, personality traits may not be as important in driving vengeful behavior as initially hypothesized (e.g., Jones and Paulhus 2011; Satornino et al. 2023). Nevertheless, I found that rating a negative experience first reduces the vengefulness of written reviews for individuals with some psychopathy traits too. Therefore, marketers can use rumination refocusing to reduce the vengefulness of individuals with psychopathy traits too.

***Study 6: Refocusing makes written reviews less vengeful.***

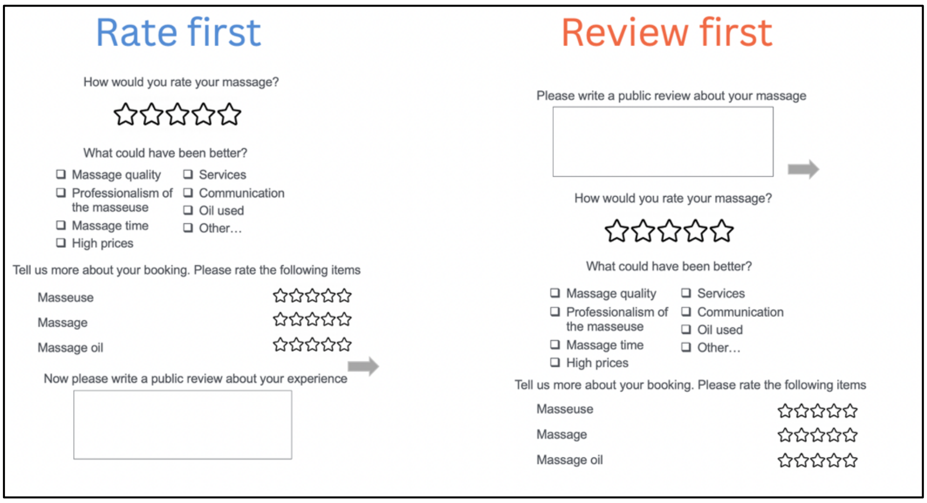
In Studies 2 and 5 participants encountered severe service failures, which led to vengeful behavior. I anticipate that individuals will display a greater inclination for vengeance when the service failure is more severe, in line with $H_{1b}$ and $H_{2c}$. However, it is worth noting that most service failures are not extreme, and consumers may not encounter multiple service failures before expressing their opinion through reviews. Therefore, I am interested in examining whether the same effect applies to less severe failures. Specifically, I want to determine if rumination refocusing reduces the vengefulness of reviews also in case of less severe failures. Additionally, I aim to test whether the order of rating or reviewing experiences amplifies the vengefulness of the review in the absence of a service failure or in the context of a positive experience.

Thus, in Study 6, participants were presented with an online massage app service failure, which they were asked to review. The experiment had a 4 (severe failure, low severity failure, no failure, positive experience) × 2 (rate vs. review first; Figure 10) between-subject design (see Section BC4 in Appendix B for the study design). 4,068 MTurk workers participated in this study. Two hundred eighty-seven (287) participants failed the attention check (by agreeing to the "I am a robot" statement), and 1,024 participants wrote a written review that was not directly related to the prompt. Thus, the final sample size comprised 2,757 participants (49.7% female, 49% male, 1.3% preferred not to disclose). Participants were in the age groups 18-24 (3.4%), 25-34 years (56%), 35-44 years (25.3%), 45-54 years (9.7%), 55-64 (4.2%), 65-74 (1.2%) and preferred not to state (.2%).

In all conditions, participants were told they had booked a one-hour massage through an at-home massage app. In the high severity condition, participants were told that the masseuse was late, and did not deliver the full one-hour massage. In the low severity condition, the masseuse was late, but still delivered a good massage. In the control condition, the participant was told that they had a one-hour massage, whereas in the positive experience condition, the participant received an amazing massage and a free massage oil (the severity conditions have been pretested; see Section BA2 in Appendix B for further details). The participants were then asked to write a public review of their experience.

In the rating first condition, individuals were asked to rate their order first ("How would you rate your massage?"). They were then asked to write a written review of their experience. In the review first condition, participants were first asked to write a written review, and then rate their experience (Figure 10). Next, the participants responded to a set of items designed to measure all constructs of interest.

**Figure 10: Study 6 Rating Manipulation**



Rate first

How would you rate your massage?

☆☆☆☆☆

What could have been better?

☐ Massage quality
☐ Professionalism of the masseuse
☐ Massage time
☐ High prices
☐ Services
☐ Communication
☐ Oil used
☐ Other…

Tell us more about your booking. Please rate the following items

| | |
|---|---|
| Masseuse | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Massage | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Massage oil | ☆☆☆☆☆ |

Now please write a public review about your experience

Review first

Please write a public review about your massage

How would you rate your massage?

☆☆☆☆☆

What could have been better?

☐ Massage quality
☐ Professionalism of the masseuse
☐ Massage time
☐ High prices
☐ Services
☐ Communication
☐ Oil used
☐ Other…

Tell us more about your booking. Please rate the following items

| | |
|---|---|
| Masseuse | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Massage | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Massage oil | ☆☆☆☆☆ |

***Measures***

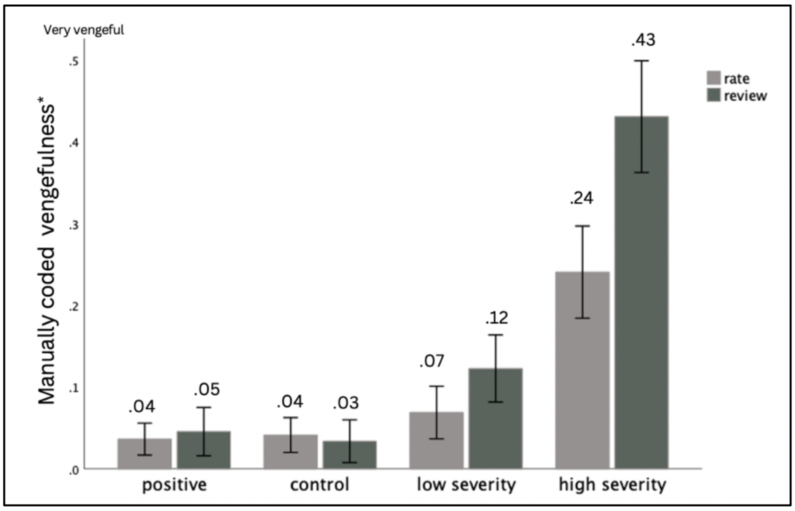
*Dependent variable.* I measured the vengefulness of written reviews manually with the help of 2 research assistants. Written reviews were coded in as 2 for displaying vengefulness, 1 for displaying negativity (but not vengefulness), and 0 otherwise. The interrater agreement, Cohen's Kappa, between the coders was .884, indicating a substantial agreement (McHugh 2012). Disagreements were resolved by the research team.

*Manipulation Checks.* A one-way (rate vs. review) ANOVA on the rating manipulation check confirmed that the manipulation was successful. As expected, participants in the rating first condition indicated that they rated their experience before leaving a review ($M_{\text{ratefirst}} = 1.04$ vs. 1.43; *F*(1, 2755) = 681.253, $p < .001$). Similarly, participants in the review first condition considered to be asked about reviewing their order first, before rating it ($M_{\text{reviewfirst}} = 1.05$ vs. 1.42; *F*(1, 2755) = 561.683, $p < .001$). A one-way (severity condition) ANOVA on failure severity confirmed that the manipulation was successful. Participants were asked to indicate "how severe they would describe the company's service failure presented above" (1 = "No severe failure was presented to me," 7 = "Very severe failure was presented to me.") Participants in the more severe condition rated the failure as more severe than participants in the low severity, control of positive experience condition ($M_{\text{severe}}= 2.85$ vs. $M_{\text{lowseverity}} = 2.38$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 2.17$ vs. $M_{\text{positive}} = 2.06$; *F*(3, 2753) = 53.969, $p < .001$). Tables BB8 and BB9 (in Appendix B) provide study measurement items, reliabilities, and means.

***Results***

*The influence of rumination refocusing on vengefulness.* I found a main effect of rating ($M_{\text{rate}} = .10$ vs. $M_{\text{review}} = .17$; *F*(1, 2755) = 17.138, $p <.001$) and the severity of failure ($M_{\text{severe}}= .34$ vs. $M_{\text{lowseverity}} = .10$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = .04$ vs. $M_{\text{positive}} = .04$; *F*(3, 2753) = 93.018, $p < .001$) on the dependent variable, and a significant interaction effect (F(3, 2753) = 9.327, $p < .001$). Therefore, I found further support for the hypothesis that rating a negative experience reduces the vengefulness of the written review (see Figure 11), in line with $H_3$.

**Figure 11: Comparison of vengefulness across conditions**



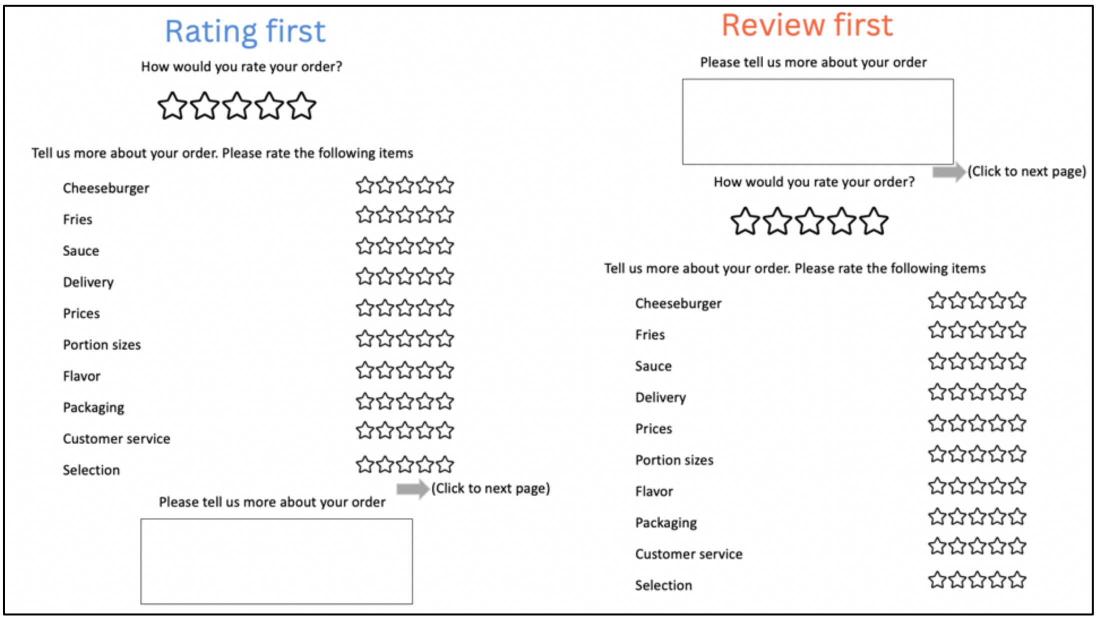
*Discussion.* The findings of Study 6 provide additional support for $H_3$, indicating that rumination refocusing mitigates the adverse impact of rumination on vengefulness. In addition, I found further support for $H_{1b}$, demonstrating that the severity of failure influences vengefulness. Also, the findings indicate that the order of rating or reviewing experiences does not amplify the vengefulness of the review in the absence of a service failure or in the context of a positive experience. Thus, the results suggest that implementing a rating system prior to prompting consumers to write a review effectively reduces consumer vengefulness in case of a severe or low severity failure, while does not impact the written reviews in case of a positive experience.

### ***Study 7: Rumination shifts focus from failure to other aspects of the service.***

The objective of this study, pre-registered at Aspredicted.com (#136926, https://aspredicted.org/Z4B_86C), was to elucidate the underlying process mechanism. Specifically, my aim was to demonstrate that employing a rating first system diverts the focus of rumination from the service failure itself (failure-focused rumination) to other aspects of the service (for further details of the study design, please see Section BC5 of Appendix B). This shift in attention ultimately leads to a reduction in the impact of the failure on vengeful behavior. Nine hundred eighty (980) MTurk participants were recruited. Ninety-three (93) participants failed the attention check, by answering “yes” to being a robot. Furthermore, 355 participants left a review that was not directly related to the prompt (e.g., they described a different service failure, talked about how to write a review in general or did not discuss the prompt in any way). These exclusion criteria have been pre-registered. Therefore, the final sample size included 532 participants (45.7% female, 53.9% male, .4% preferred not to state), aged between 18-24 (7%), 25-34 (39.8%), 35-44 (23.3%), 45-54 (13.5%), 55-64 (10.4%), 65-74 (5.6%) and 75 or older (.4%).

The experiment had a 2 (severe failure vs. low severity failure) × 2 (rating first vs. review first; Figure 12) between-subject design. The prompt utilized was identical to that of Study 2, where participants encountered a negative experience with a food delivery provider. In the rating first condition, individuals were asked to rate their order first ("How would you rate your order") before writing a review of their experience. In the review first condition, participants were first asked to write a written review, before rating their experience. Next, participants responded to a set of items designed to measure all constructs of interest.

**Figure 12: Study 7 Rating Manipulation**



Rating first

How would you rate your order?

☆☆☆☆☆

Tell us more about your order. Please rate the following items

| | |
|---|---|
| Cheeseburger | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Fries | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Sauce | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Delivery | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Prices | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Portion sizes | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Flavor | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Packaging | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Customer service | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Selection | ☆☆☆☆☆ |

(Click to next page)

Please tell us more about your order

Review first

Please tell us more about your order

(Click to next page)

How would you rate your order?

☆☆☆☆☆

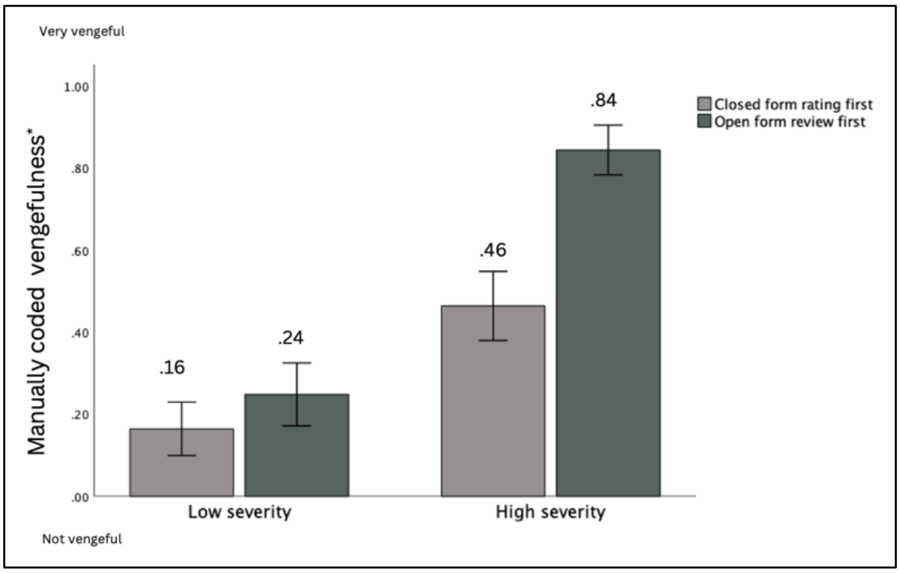
Tell us more about your order. Please rate the following items

| | |
|---|---|
| Cheeseburger | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Fries | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Sauce | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Delivery | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Prices | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Portion sizes | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Flavor | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Packaging | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Customer service | ☆☆☆☆☆ |
| Selection | ☆☆☆☆☆ |

### *Measures*

*Dependent variable.* I measured the hostility of the written review manually with the help of 2 research assistants. Therefore, the written review was coded in as 1 for displaying vengefulness, and 0 otherwise (i.e., a negative review that is not vengeful). The interrater agreement, Cohen's Kappa, between the coders was .710, indicating a substantial agreement (McHugh 2012). Disagreements were resolved by the research team. Replicating the findings of study 6, I found that individuals write a significantly less vengeful review when they are asked to rate various aspects of their experience first (Figure 13; *F*(3, 528) = 70.28, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .285$).

**Figure 13: Study 7 Vengefulness of written reviews**



*Mediator.* Rumination was assessed using the following measures. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they felt wronged by the company on a scale ranging from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("very much so"). Additionally, I measured the degree to which participants directed their attention towards all aspects of the service. Participants in the rating first condition indicated that they focused on all aspects of the service ($M_{\text{ratefirst}} = 3.61$, $SD = 1.16$ vs. $M_{\text{reviewfirst}} = 2.86$, $SD = 1.28$, $F(1, 530) = 49.87$, $p < .001$), while I do not find a significant difference between how wronged participants felt by the company depending on the rating condition ($M_{\text{ratefirst}} = 3.33$, $SD = 1.37$ vs. $M_{\text{reviewfirst}} = 3.36$, $SD = 1.29$, $F(1, 530) = .052$, $p = .820$). Nevertheless, participants who were presented with a more severe failure felt more wronged by the company than those participants who were presented with a less severe failure ($M_{\text{severe}} = 3.71$, $SD = 1.27$ vs. $M_{\text{lowseverity}} = 2.94$, $SD = 1.28$, $F(1, 530) = 47.84$, $p < .001$).

*Manipulation Checks.* A one-way (rate vs. review) ANOVA on the rating manipulation check confirmed that the manipulation was successful. As expected, participants in the rating first condition indicated that they rated their experience before leaving a review ($M_{\text{ratefirst}} = 1.04$

vs. 1.76; *F*(1,530) = 557.87, $p < .001$). Similarly, participants in the review first condition considered to be asked about reviewing their order first, before rating it ($M_{reviewfirst} = 1.73$ vs. 1.06; *F*(1, 530) = 423.58, $p < .001$). A one-way (severity condition) ANOVA on failure severity confirmed that the manipulation was successful. Participants rated the severe service failure as more negative than the low severity failure ("On a scale of 1 to 5, how severe would you rate the service failure?"; 1 = not at all, 5 = very much so; $M_{severe} = 4.16$, *SD* = 1.07 vs. $M_{lowseverity} = 3.14$, *SD* = .956), *F*(1, 530)= 133.81, $p < .001$).

*Control Variables.* Finally, participants provided their likelihood of ordering groceries from online delivery providers. The control did not impact the reported results and thus is not discussed further.

***Results***

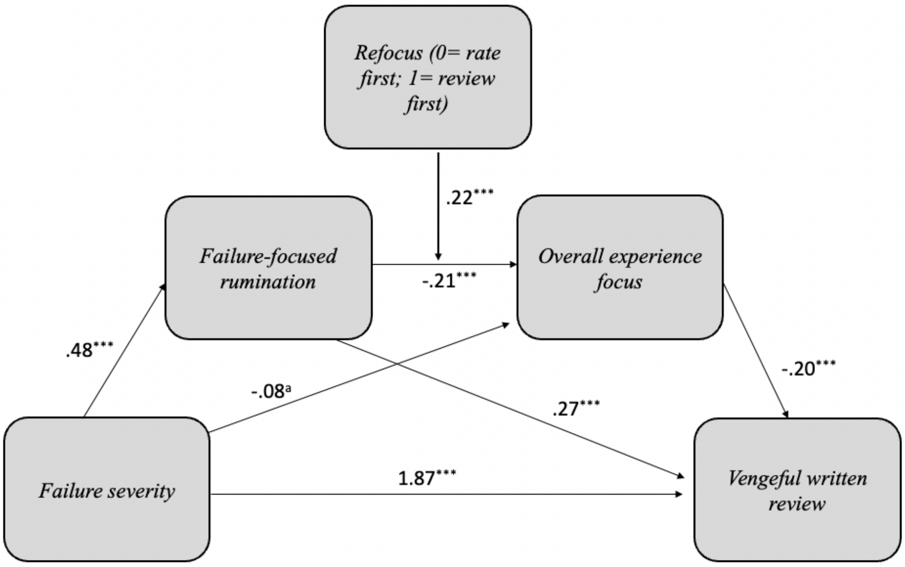
*Serial moderated mediation.* Individuals tend to engage in rumination about a service failure when they think they have been wronged by a company. However, the way reviews are gathered can refocus this rumination away from negative aspects towards the overall service experience. As consumers contemplate the entirety of their service encounter, they are likely to leave a less vengeful review. To test this process, I conducted a serial moderated mediation regression analysis with failure severity (low vs high) as the independent variable, failure-focused rumination as the first mediator, focus on overall experience as the second mediator, vengefulness of the written review as the dependent variable, and rumination refocusing (rate first vs review first) as a moderator changing the focus of rumination (Hayes 2018, PROCESS v4.1 model 91; see Figure 14). More specifically, the serial mediated moderation aims to show how the rating sequence changes consumers' focus from the failure to the overall experience, thereby reducing the impact of rumination on vengeful behavior.

This serial moderated mediation analysis (for details, see Appendix B, Table BD3) showed that the severity of failure has a direct main effect on vengefulness of reviews ($\beta$ =

.5776, SE = .0971, Z = 5.95; $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%}$ = [.3874; .7679]), and that a more severe failure triggers more failure-focused rumination ($\beta$ = .4881, SE = .0463, $t$ = 10.54; $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%}$ = [.3971; .5790]). Severity of the failure has a marginal main effect ($\beta$ = -.0847, SE = .0507, $t$ = -1.66; $p < .10$, $CI_{95\%}$ = [-.1844; .0150]), while failure-focused rumination has a direct main effect on overall experience focus ($\beta$ = -.2149, SE = .0559, $t$ = -3.84; $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%}$ = [-.3248; -.1051]). As predicted, I found a significant main effect of rumination refocusing on overall experience focus ($\beta$ = -1.50, SE = .2840, $t$ = -5.30, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%}$ = [-2.0641; -.9481]), and a significant failure-focused rumination × rumination refocusing interaction on overall experience focus ($\beta$ = .2251, SE = .0788, $t$ = 2.85, $p < .01$, $CI_{95\%}$ = [.0704; .3801]), showing that rating one's experience on various factors shifts the focus of the rumination from the service failure to the overall experience ($\beta_{ratefirst}$ = -.2149, SE = .0559, $t$ = -3.84, $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%}$ = [-.3248; -.1051] vs. ($\beta_{reviewfirst}$ = .0103, SE= .0610, $t$ = .1688, $p$ = .8660, $CI_{95\%}$ = [-.1096; .1302]). Furthermore, the relationship between overall experience focus (second mediator) and vengefulness of reviews (dependent variable) was negative and significant ($\beta$ = -.2065, SE = .0763, Z = -2.7071, $p < .01$, $CI_{95\%}$ = [-.3561; -.0570]).

The indirect effect of severity on vengefulness through the two ruminations show that rating the experience on various factors reduces the impact of severity on vengefulness through shifting the focus of rumination from the service failure to the overall experience. In other words, the serial mediated moderation shows that a more severe failure is more likely to lead to vengeful behavior, the process being mediated by participants' focus on the failure itself. Nevertheless, rating a negative experience on various factors first switches participants focus from the failure to the overall experience, thereby reducing the vengefulness of the written review itself. Tables BB10 and BB11 (in Appendix B) provide study measurement items, reliabilities, and means.

**Figure 14: Serial moderated mediation model**


Refocus (0= rate first; 1= review first)
.22***
Failure-focused rumination
-.21***
Overall experience focus
.48***
-.08a
-.20***
.27***
Failure severity
1.87***
Vengeful written review

*Discussion.* Study 7 provides further evidence that a more severe transgression triggers more vengeful behavior ($H_{1a,\ b}$), as well as more intense failure-focused rumination ($H_{2c}$). Moreover, I show that failure-focused rumination triggers vengeful behavior in line with $H_{2b}$ and provide further evidence of rumination mediating the relationship between a transgression and vengeful behavior ($H_{2a}$). Study 7 also provides evidence of the process mechanism behind rumination refocusing. More specifically, rating a negative experience on various factors first makes the subsequent written review less vengeful, because it shifts the focus of rumination away from the service failure to the overall experience, thereby providing further support for $H_3$.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Facilitating consumer reviews, even negative ones, can be desirable for many reasons. Negative opinions can boost sales by making the positive feedback more believable, leading to increased loyalty and more positive consumer responses (Allard, Dunn, and White 2020; Berger, Sorensen, and Rasmussen 2010; Umashankar, Ward, and Dahl 2017). Similarly, the blemishing effect points to the importance of negative reviews in making positive feedback more salient (Ein-Gar et al. 2011). And evidence suggests that uncurated, candid reviews can boost intention to purchase and willingness to pay a price premium, by reducing consumers' perceived uncertainty (Liu et al. 2015). In essence, the presence of some minor negative information can make the overall content more persuasive and believable.

However, the findings indicate that reviews that are highly vengeful can have harmful consequences and discourage future consumer purchases. I focus on how to manage these reviews, and thus make a significant contribution to existing research, by demonstrating how to reduce the vengefulness of reviews. Specifically, this chapter shows that collecting ratings before reviews can diminish consumers' inclination towards vengeful conduct and reduce the level of aggression expressed in their written reviews. I suggest that by carefully designing how consumer reviews are collected, companies can mitigate the vengefulness of reviews, through a shift in the focus of rumination away from specific negative elements and towards a more comprehensive perspective. This chapter, therefore, extends the literature on vengeful consumer behavior not only by elucidating the detrimental effects on brands in terms of reduced purchase intent, but also by presenting strategies to mitigate vengeful behavior and its consequences.

### *Theoretical Implications*

While facilitating customer reviews can be beneficial to companies, prior research has also identified some potential risks in doing so, especially when it comes to extreme and vindictive negative reviews (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Lee, Park, and Han 2008). While it is often impossible to discourage a disgruntled consumer from writing a negative review (Liu et al. 2020), the way in which such review is collected may help mitigate its vengefulness. By eliciting ratings before reviews, the firm can minimize potential brand damage, by ensuring the reviews are less likely to be punitive and act as a vehicle for vengeful behavior. This represents an important contribution to the literature on managing negative reviews (Liu et al. 2020).

The literature on vengeful behavior has introduced the role of rumination and its impact on consumer behavior (Duffek, Eisingerich, and Merlo 2023; Kähr et al. 2016). I contribute to this literature by shedding light on the importance of rumination following a transgression. First, I advance our understanding of how rumination and its intensity drive aggression in the marketing domain (Martin and Tesser 1996). Specifically, I show that rumination mediates the pathway between service failure and vengeful consumer behavior, thereby shedding light on consumers' thinking process before turning to vengeful behavior. I show that the more intensely one focuses on the negative features of the situation, and the service failure itself, the more likely one is to turn to vengeful behavior. This important aspect of studying consumers' mental state before they turn to vengeful behavior not only highlights when and why they may turn to vengeful behavior, but importantly, offers novel insights on what constitutes intense rumination. The findings demonstrate that constantly thinking about the failure, how one was mistreated by the company, and their emotions with regards to the failure, translates into more intense rumination, and hence drives more vengeful behavior. Thus, I extend discussion beyond the severity of the failure as driver of vengeful behavior and offer a novel perspective on consumers thinking process that warrants further scholarly exploration (Martin and Tesser 1996).

Furthermore, by showing how refocusing rumination from the perceived failure to the overall experience can reduce the impact of rumination on vengeful behavior, I contribute to the literature on the cessation of rumination (Klinger 1975; Koole et al. 1997; Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982). I demonstrate that rumination focus can be subtly shifted simply by asking consumers to rate various aspects of their experience first, before leaving a review. This is a particularly novel and consequential insight, as previous research has only focused on the cessation of rumination, without establishing how a third party can reduce the impact of rumination on vengeful behavior (Klinger 1975; Martin and Tesser 1996). By suggesting that rumination refocusing acts as an easily implementable form of distraction, I provide a new understanding of not only consumers' mental state before engaging in vengeful behavior, but also how to reduce rumination and shift its focus. This constitutes a contribution not only to the marketing literature, but also to academic discussion in the aggression literature on the role of rumination in driving aggression, and on the cessation of rumination (Koole et al. 1997).

### *Managerial Implications*

Negative reviews can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, in moderation they can help a brand improve its products and services, appear more trustworthy (Kaemingk 2020) and transparent (Liu et al. 2015), and even lead to more favorable consumer perceptions (Ein-Gar et al. 2011). However, when they are highly negative and vengeful, they can have detrimental effects on a firm's brand perceptions (e.g., Monga and John 2008), its market share (Tang 2017), financial performance (Gopinath, Thomas, and Krishnamurthi 2014), and even stock and shareholder value (Gruca and Rego 2005). A key managerial question is therefore how to reduce the number of reviews meant to harm the brand, while at the same time increasing the proportion of more constructive, helpful reviews. In this chapter I explored how to turn a consumer who could potentially leave a vengeful review into a less negative and less vengeful one. In doing so, I uncover several important and timely managerial implications.

First, I identify a simple yet impactful way to reduce the vengefulness of negative reviews and collect feedback that provides more constructive insights, rather than vindictive elements merely intended to hurt the brand. Encouraging consumers to rate their experience first before leaving a negative review can reduce consumer vengefulness in written reviews. Managers can thus benefit from more constructive feedback and can avoid brand saboteurs who initiate retaliatory behavior against the brand (Kähr et al. 2016). Additionally, I provide evidence that vengeful reviews can be influential in shaping consumer decision-making and significantly diminish consumers' willingness to make a purchase. Consequently, I offer managerial insights into how to handle the phenomenon of “review-bombing”, with timely guidance for managers who need to address revengeful consumers (Deighton 2023; Wordsworth 2019). Given the increasing incidence of vindictive consumer behavior, providing management with a practical approach to mitigate the maliciousness of written reviews is highly desirable and can positively impact consumers' future purchase intentions.

Second, this chapter underscores the key role of rumination and its association with vengeful behavior. By elucidating the characteristics of intense rumination and exploring techniques to diminish or halt rumination altogether, the current findings equip managers with an effective tool to mitigate the risks posed by toxic consumers. Implementing a practice of collecting ratings before reviews enables managers to redirect the focus of rumination away from the specific failure and towards the overall consumer experience. Rumination is essentially a negative form of reappraisal that causes consumers to cling to negative experiences and thoughts. Once initiated, rumination can only be halted through the attainment of goals, abandonment of goals, or refocusing. The latter is often the only option available to managers. I propose that by redirecting individuals' rumination away from the service failure and towards other aspects of the service, the impact of rumination on vengefulness can be diminished. As a result, my research offers valuable pre-emptive measures to minimize the potential adverse effects of vengefulness on brands.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

This work provides important advances to marketing research, but it is not without limitations that serve as opportunities for further research. First, in my observational data analysis, I could not observe individuals’ perceptions of the severity of the failure, nor how individuals rated the various aspects of their experience. I have no reason to believe that this information would influence the vengefulness of the written review, but further research might obtain more individual-level data to study such effects. Second, my research uncovered mixed findings pertaining to the role of personality traits, potentially opening up questions about the extent to which they actually do influence the phenomena under study. Future research could shed more light on this question. Third, my framework assumes that individuals escalate the issue on review websites or social media, and I do not observe offline complaint behavior. Further research could thus explore how rumination refocusing in an offline setting might benefit firms. Fourth, further work could explore what types of service failures lead to the most hostile forms of written aggression. By looking at different forms of justice violations, such as interactional, distribute and procedural, further work could investigate which type of justice violation triggers the most intense rumination.

Last, future work could also explore the impact of the proposed rating system on the variance in the vengeful reviews. More specifically, if the average rating for a product is high, consumers may overlook the negative (and potentially vengeful) reviews. However, when the average rating of a product or service is comparatively low, it may be associated with inferior quality, prompting further attention towards the negative reviews. In that case, looking at the variance of the vengeful reviews, and whether our recommended rating system has a positive impact on offerings with notably low ratings, can be an area of fruitful future research.

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# Chapter 3:
# What is Influencer Authenticity, and How Can Brands Work with Influencers to Create Authentic Branded Content?

In the third chapter of the thesis, I scrutinize the dark side of marketing from the perspective of influencers. Managerial discussion has raised concerns regarding an authenticity crisis, where influencers collaborate with brands that they lack genuine belief in, solely driven by financial motivations. Consequently, customers have become increasingly distrustful of influencers, exhibiting scepticism towards influencer-brand partnerships, and often resorting to unfollowing or disregarding influencer content. This chapter explores how different stakeholders perceive influencer authenticity, along with the authenticity of the branded content created. In doing so, I generate new theory on influencer marketing and offer managerial recommendations on how brands can work with influencers to create authentic branded content. This chapter uses exploratory in-depth interviews with consumers, influencers, brand managers, and influencer marketing agencies to triangulate how each group perceives the authenticity of influencers and their branded content. It examines the tension between influencers and brands through the lens of assemblage theory and explores the nature of influencer-brand relationships, ranging from paid sponsor arrangements to true co-partnerships. Finally, it explores how influencer marketing agencies can be used to manage the tension of authenticity inherent in the influencer-brand relationship.

## Introduction

*"Unfortunately, many brands today think they can shortcut trust. They pay personalities to promote products they don't actually use or believe in. The result is influencer marketing that feels fake and inauthentic, breeding distrust (and anger) among consumers."*
-GRIN, 2020

The opening quote points to an emerging and troublesome phenomenon: brands and influencers are increasingly cooperating to produce content that consumers ultimately see as inauthentic. This is in stark contrast with the importance consumers increasingly place on authenticity in their interactions with influencers (Econsultancy 2022). Evidence suggests that while 88% of consumers want authenticity from influencers, nearly 50% of influencers are perceived to be inauthentic (HypeAuditor 2023; Morning Consult 2019), and 35% of consumers think influencers are dishonest and lack transparency when it comes to both their branded content and their own image (Lynch 2018). Consequently, marketing agencies such as Ogilvy have taken the decision not to work with influencers they deem to be inauthentic, including those who distort or retouch their bodies in their posts (Greenwood 2022).

This "authenticity crisis" in influencer marketing has given rise to important academic and managerial discussions (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard 2020; Chen, Yan, and Smith 2023; Forbes 2022) around what determines an influencer's authenticity. Prior work has tended to examine the authenticity of influencers by looking at it mainly from one perspective, such as that of the influencers themselves or their followers. For example, Audrezet, de Kerviler and Moulard (2020) argue that there are two key types of influencer authenticity: passionate influencer authenticity (e.g., when influencers are driven by an inner passion, more than by a commercial objective) and transparent authenticity (e.g., when influencers disclose information about the contractual terms of a collaboration). According to Lee and Eastin (2021), consumers assess influencer authenticity using the key constructs of sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness. While these perspectives are undoubtedly useful, looking at authenticity merely through the lens of a single stakeholder neglects a holistic overview of the vested, and at times conflicting interests of all stakeholders in the market, which may further exacerbate the authenticity crisis. Thus, to address this problem, I ask: do different stakeholders have different views of what constitutes influencer authenticity in accordance with their unique viewpoints? And furthermore, what can we learn from the various tensions between stakeholders that can ultimately help produce truly authentic branded content?

To address these questions, I draw on assemblage theory: I posit that influencers can be regarded as assemblages (Lury 2009; Parmentier and Fisher 2015), comprising heterogeneous and evolving sets of components with varying capacities that define their identity (DeLanda 2006; Parmentier and Fisher 2015). Put differently, influencers' content and their interaction with the different stakeholders (defined as components of the assemblage) can define the influencer's identity. More specifically, the influencer creates branded- or non-branded content that stakeholders (followers and consumers, brand managers, influencer marketing agencies, and influencers themselves) interact with in a way that can stabilize or destabilize the influencer's authenticity (DeLanda 2006).

Assemblage theory is particularly useful because it enables us to understand how different stakeholders navigate organizational ties, and helps us shed light on the nature of influencer-brand relationships, ranging from traditional paid sponsor arrangements to true co-partnership. In so doing, I use a discovery-oriented, theories-in-use approach (Zeithaml et al. 2020), by blending in-depth interviews with extant literature to develop conceptual themes (Challagalla, Murtha, and Jaworski 2014). I complement managerial insights from qualitative interviews with perspectives from consumers, influencers, and influencer marketing agencies to generate novel theory on influencer authenticity. This leads to two main contributions.

First, this chapter reconceptualizes influencer authenticity through the lens of all major stakeholders involved, to gain a comprehensive understanding of what authenticity really means in the context of influencer marketing. I identify *engagement* as a critical, yet hitherto neglected property of authenticity, and I expand the existing properties of authenticity to also include personal storytelling to build *originality*, sharing of personal opinions to enhance *transparency*, consistent and topic-specific content generation as a representation of *expertise*, and the need to build *integrity* beyond intrinsic motivation. Thus, through the lens of assemblage theory, I define an influencer's authenticity as a *holistic assessment by influencers, consumers, brand managers and influencer marketing agencies, based on five properties, namely expertise, engagement, integrity, originality, and transparency, whereby the role and importance of each of these properties varies according to the stakeholder's own vested interest.*

Second, because influencers' authenticity can impact the effectiveness of the influencer-brand collaboration (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard 2020; Chen, Yan, and Smith 2023; Leung et al. 2022; Leung, Gu, and Palmatier 2022), ignoring the potential tensions inherent in the relationship limits our understanding of the key drivers of authentic branded content. Thus, this chapter examines these tensions by looking at how different stakeholders navigate the organizational ties in an influencer assemblage. I develop a 'Branded Content Authenticity Spectrum' that identifies the range of influencer-brand partnerships and highlights which properties of influencer authenticity are pivotal for the creation of authentic branded content within a given partnership. This allows us to generate new knowledge (Table 5) on what constitutes influencer authenticity, as well as how authentic branded content may be created effectively.

## Table 5: Review of the Influencer Authenticity Marketing Literature

| | Studies influencer-brand relationship? | Studies influencer authenticity? | Focus | Focal independent variables | Focal dependent variables | Theoretical underpinnings | Studies |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Breves et al. (2019)** | No | Yes, credibility (sign of expertise) | The study finds that influencer-brand fit has an impact on influencers' credibility. Influencer credibility has a positive effect on behavioral intentions and brand evaluations | Influencer-brand fit | Perceived credibility, brand evaluation; behavioral intentions | Social adaptation; attribution theory | Online experiment and survey |
| **Lou and Yuan (2019)** | No | Yes, credibility (sign of expertise ) | The study proposes an integrated social media influencer value model to incorporate the role of advertising value and source credibility in influencer marketing | Influencer's trustworthiness, attractiveness, similarity to follower | Consumer trust in influencer's branded post; brand awareness and purchase intention | Source credibility; advertising content value | Online survey; atrial least squares path modeling |
| **Torres et al. (2019)** | Yes, influencer-brand fit | No | Consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intention are elicited by the influencer's attractiveness and congruence between the influencer and the brand | Influencer-brand fit; attractiveness | Consumer attitudes; purchase intentions | Meaning transfer model | Online survey; structural equation modeling |
| **Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard (2020)** | No | Yes | The paper discusses two emergent authenticity management strategies: passionate and transparent authenticity. The paper discusses how social media influencers can manage authenticity | - | - | Self-determination theory | Non-participative observations and semi-directive interviews |
| **Lee and Eastin (2020)** | No | Yes | Consumers form more favorable attitudes towards sincere influencers. These influencers are more effective in evoking positive brand attitudes when endorsing utilitarian products (vs. symbolic products) | Perceived sincerity | Attitude towards influencer; brand attitude; purchase intention | Brand personality; schema theory | Online experiment |
| **Martínez-López et al. (2020b)** | Yes, congruence of influencer and endorsed product/service | No | The study looks at the brands' control over the communicated message, as well as the impact of the celebrity level of the influencer and his/her congruence with the product or service in the post | Brand control<br>Commercial orientation | Trust in the influencer; Post credibility; Interestingness about the post's content; Willingness to search for additional product information | Credibility theory | Lab experiment |
| **Trivedi and Sama (2020)** | No | Yes, expertise (sign of expertise) | The study explores the comparative effect of celebrities and influencers on consumers' online purchase intention. Choosing an expert influencer (over an attractive influencer) provides an advantage. | Celebrity vs. influencer (brand attitude and brand admiration as mediators) | Online purchase intention | Theory of reasoned action | Survey |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Yuan and Lou (2020)** | No | Yes, credibility (sign of expertise) | Perceived credibility and perceived fairness have a positive impact on followers' interest in influencer-promoted products. This relationship is mediated by the strength of followers' para-social relationship with influencers | Perceived credibility; perceived fairness | Product interest | Source credibility; communication justice | Online survey; Structural equation modeling |
| **Wellman et al. (2020** | No | Yes | Influencers use the concept of authenticity as an ethical framework when producing sponsored content | - | - | Ethics of authenticity | Case study of travel and tourism industry |
| **Belanche et al. (2021)** | Yes, influencer-brand congruence | No | The study discusses the congruence between the influencer, the brand, and the customer. When influencer-consumer congruence is high, high (vs low) influencer-product congruence results in high (vs low) consumer-product congruence | Congruencies between the influencer, product, and consumer | Intention to purchase; Intention to recommend | Balance theory, cognitive dissonance theory, and congruity theory | Online survey |
| **Kapitan, van Esch, and Kietzmann (2021)** | No | Yes | The study examines the impact of endorser type (celebrity vs. influencer) on consumers' willingness to pay for the endorsed product. It examines the boundary condition of authenticity on willingness to pay. | Endorser type | Willingness to pay | Attribution theory | Lab experiment |
| **Kim and Kim (2021)** | No | Yes | The study explores whether the influencer's source characteristics impact customer trust. Trust mediates the impact of expertise, homophily, and authenticity on loyalty. Physical attractiveness does not contribute to building follower trust | Source characteristics of influencers (expertise, authenticity, physical attractiveness, homophily) | Follower trust | Social exchange theory | Cross-sectional survey |
| **Reinikainen et al. (2021)** | No | Yes, credibility (sign of expertise) | The study looks at the role of comments under YouTube vlog entries in driving influencer's perceived credibility | Para-social relationship with the influencer | Perceived credibility of the influencer | Endorsement Effectiveness | Online survey |
| **Von Mettenheim and Wiedmann (2021)** | Yes, congruence of influencer-brand personality | No | Examines the importance of the congruence of influencer's personality with brand personality and consumers ideal/actual self | Congruence between influencer and brand personality | Post attitude and post belief | Theory on opinion change; Social adaptation theory; ELM | Online survey |
| **Leung et al. (2022)** | No | Yes (originality as a defining property of authenticity) | Influencer's originality (authenticity) enhances influencer marketing effectiveness | Influencer marketing spend | Engagement (number of reposts) | Communication model | Sponsored influencer posts on Weibo |
| **Shoenberger and Kim (2022)** | No | Yes | Perceived influencer authenticity mediates the relationship between perceived homophily and purchase intent | Perceived homophily | Purchase intention | Social cognitive theory | Online survey |
| **Steils, Martin and Toti (2022)** | No | Yes | Authenticity mediates the effect of perceived community size on engagement with influencer's content | Community size | Engagement with influencer content | Transparency paradox | Lab experiment and Field Study |
| **Chen, Yan, and Smith (2023)** | Yes (sponsored video only) | Yes | Explores how sponsored videos' design strategies affect viewer engagement through the influencer authenticity dilemma | Transparent & passionate authenticity | Digital Engagement | Influencer authenticity | Field data |
| **This chapter** | Yes | Yes | The objective of this chapter is to understand the properties of authenticity through the eyes of key stakeholders and explore the influencer-brand partnership through the lens of influencer authenticity | Expertise, Engagement, Transparency, Integrity, Originality | Perceived influencer authenticity | Assemblage theory | In-depth interviews, Online survey |

## Assemblage Theory

Prior literature has looked at influencer authenticity from the perspective of a single stakeholder and has not explored the nature of the influencer-brand partnership through the lens of authenticity (Table 5). In this chapter, I first look at influencer authenticity through the perspective of all stakeholders involved in the relationship and discuss how influencers and brands can work together to create authentic branded content. To do so, I use the assemblage theory perspective because it enables us to understand how different stakeholders navigate organizational ties. The assemblage theory conceptualizes different entities as systems that include individual components that interact with one another in a way that can impact the assemblage's identity (DeLanda 2006). In the marketing literature, brands, their audiences, and person brands have been regarded as assemblages whose identity is construed by the different components of the assemblage (Lury 2009; Parmentier and Fisher 2015).

Influencers are part of a larger social assemblage that includes various components, properties, and capacities. First, the components are the stakeholders involved in the influencer assemblage (followers and consumers, brand managers, other influencers, members of influencer marketing agencies). These components interact with the influencer, for instance, consume the influencers' content, or contract the influencer to produce content. Second, the influencer assemblage is made up of various elements, or *properties*, which are measurable characteristics that specify what the assemblage is (I propose these properties to be influencers' expertise, engagement, originality, transparency, and integrity). These properties are brought together to create the influencer's identity, the traits and qualities that characterize the assemblage. Identity is distinct from the conceptualization denoting the self or sense of self (Ahuvia 2005; Reed et al. 2012). As authenticity encompasses one's identity and its visual representation (Dutton 2003), I argue that it is the influencers' authenticity that defines their identity. As an "identity" is not fixed but rather is a result of interaction between the different properties and components of the assemblage, these identities and hence authenticity can emerge and are not static nor fixed (Parmentier and Fisher 2015).

Third, the *capacities* of the influencer assemblage define what the entity does, or what can be done to it. For instance, brand managers have the capacity to contract influencers to endorse their brand, which can impact the assemblage's property, such as integrity. Similarly, consumers also have the capacity to follow and interact with the influencer's content, thus driving engagement, an important property of the assemblage. Influencers' branded content has an 'expressive capacity', which can stabilize or destabilize the identity of the assemblage (DeLanda 2006; Parmentier and Fisher 2015). More specifically, influencers' branded content can improve or tarnish the perceived authenticity of the influencer. I thus posit that an influencer's authenticity arises from the interaction of the properties of the assemblage, and the components within the assemblage. More specifically, different components (i.e., stakeholders) interact differently with the influencer, and therefore value different properties of the influencer assemblage, shaping the influencer's authenticity. Furthermore, the expressive capacity of branded content can improve or tarnish the perceived authenticity of the influencer, as well as what constitutes authentic branded content.

## Method and Data

I use this assemblage perspective to answer the research questions regarding influencer authenticity and the dynamics of how brands may work with influencers to create authentic branded content. Specifically, I explore how different stakeholders define influencer's authenticity, navigate the tensions inherent in their organizational ties, and how consumers view these tensions, by using a discovery-oriented, theories-in-use approach (Zeithaml et al. 2020). I blend in-depth interviews with the extant literature to develop conceptual themes (Challagalla, Murtha, and Jaworski 2014), and complement managerial insights from qualitative interviews with perspectives from consumers, influencers, and influencer marketing agencies. In addition, I collect insights on consumers' perceptions by recruiting 270 MTurk participants. I use this data to study how different key parties perceive the content produced by influencers.

This research involves interviews with four sets of informants (see Table CA1 and CA2 in Appendix C). Previous research has recommended using purposive sampling to obtain a knowledgeable sample and derive rich insights (Patton 1990). First, I recruited brand managers, consumers, and influencers from the alumni network and a series of executive education programs of a university. Additionally, consumers were approached in a large shopping mall and invited to participate in the study. I also reached out to influencers on social media. I identify among the participants (1) brand managers responsible for interacting with and/or recruiting influencers for their campaigns, (2) consumers who frequently engage with influencer campaigns, and/or (3) influencers themselves. Additionally, purposive sampling was followed to recruit 34 participants from influencer marketing agencies. I conducted a total of 164 in-depth interviews: 40 with consumers, 42 with influencers, 48 with brand managers, and 34 with influencer marketing agencies. All 164 interviews (Table CA1 in Appendix C) were conducted in a one-on-one and face-to-face setting, or virtually using Zoom or WebEx, and lasted 45-90 minutes each. I use the following abbreviations to identify respondents: CON1-234 for consumers, INF1-42 for influencers, BM1-48 for brand managers and IMA1-34 for influencer marketing agency respondents. 270 MTurk survey participants, who were pre-screened to be consumers too, were recruited to answer my questions on influencer and brand authenticity. Out of the 270 participants, 11 participants indicated that they do not follow any influencers on social media platforms, so their responses were not considered. Furthermore, 66 participants did not answer the full set of questions, and hence their responses were disregarded, leaving us with 193 valid responses. 56% of the participants were aged 25-34, followed by 18% aged 35-44 and 14% aged 45-54 (48% female, 50% male, .5% nonbinary and

1.5% preferred not to state). A detailed description of the sample characteristics is offered in Table CA1 (Appendix C).

### *Interview protocol*

As part of this chapter, I employed open-ended questions in the semi-structured interviews to develop new theory from exploratory data that allowed respondents to examine different personal views and opinions (Edwards and Holland 2013; Glaser et al. 2009). All respondents were assured of confidentiality. I asked participants to define influencer authenticity with their own words. I then asked a set of interview questions based on whether the participant was a brand manager, consumer, influencer, or part of an influencer marketing agency. The in-depth interviews were designed to understand (1) what influencer authenticity means to different stakeholders, (2) how brand managers work with influencers, and the challenges inherent in such relationship, (3) what consumers perceive as authentic and inauthentic branded content, and their opinions on influencer authenticity, and (4) what is the role of influencer marketing agencies in managing the tensions between influencers and brands. The full list of interview questions can be found in Table CA2 and Table CA3 in the Appendix C, which offer the full list of interview questions and detailed MTurk questionnaire, respectively.

### *Analysis*

The data analysis approach involved a common method for inductive qualitative research analysis (Corley and Gioia 2004). Three members of the research team independently coded the transcripts using open coding process. The initial concepts were identified and consequently grouped into first order categories. An inductive approach was followed: first looking at influencer and brand perceptions, and then shifting to authentic content (Eisenhardt 1989). The second step involved axial coding, where I identified how the first-order codes are related to each other through both inductive and deductive analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

Through this approach, the first order categories I identified were collated into second-order themes that helped conceptualize the patterns in the data with respect to branded content authenticity. An iterative process was followed; moving among the interview data, revisiting the relevant literature, and identifying the emerging patterns to develop conceptual categories (Eisenhardt 1989). The literature on influencer authenticity, as well as on assemblage theory helped identify the emerging theoretical concepts. Thirdly, the second-order themes were grouped into theoretical dimensions. This process involved examining the relationship between the first- and second-order categories and refining them into simpler categories, through which the key dimensions were achieved.

## Definition of Influencer Authenticity

Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers gain notoriety primarily through their social media presence (Khamis et al. 2017) and their ability to "create and diffuse high quality content" (Lee and Eastin 2021, p. 3), which can make them "trustworthy tastemakers" (De Veirman et al. 2017, p. 98). The interviews reveal that the term 'influencer' is often used interchangeably with terms such as 'content creator', 'key opinion leader' (KOL), 'YouTuber', and 'Instagrammer' to describe people who create and share content online to engage and/or entertain their followers.[2] In this research, I define influencer authenticity emically: the theory suggests that influencers are part of a larger assemblage that includes their followers (consumers), brand managers, other influencers, as well as members of influencer marketing agencies. Assemblage theory enables one to study how meaning "emerges from networked associations established between diverse kinds of consumption resources" (Canniford and Shankar 2013, p. 1053). I infer that influencer authenticity has different properties, and each component (stakeholder) stresses different properties of authenticity depending on their unique point of view and vested interest. Thus, I define influencer authenticity as a *holistic assessment*

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[2] The study of celebrity endorsements is beyond the scope of the current study.

*by influencers, consumers, brand managers and influencer marketing agencies, based on five properties, namely expertise, engagement, integrity, originality, and transparency, whereby the role and importance of each of these properties varies according to the stakeholder's own vested interest.*[3] Table 6 highlights how this proposed definition differs from previous research on influencer authenticity, Table 7 introduces the different properties of authenticity, Table 8 presents the relevant data excerpts, while Table CB1 (in Appendix C) provides a review of the literature on authenticity.

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[3] Our informants did not discuss the size of influencers as an important component of/ dimension of authenticity; therefore, we do not discuss influencer size in the manuscript.

## Table 6 :Literature Overview of the Influencer Authenticity Definition

| Authors | Definition of Authenticity | Difference in my Definition |
|---|---|---|
| Audrezet, de Kerviler and Moulard (2020) | Passionate authenticity and transparent authenticity | • I argue that 'transparency' goes beyond disclosing contractual terms, to sharing the good and bad aspects of the product and their lives, and being true to themselves<br>• I go beyond passion and introduce honesty and shared values as a definition of influencer 'integrity'<br>• I go beyond the two dimensions, and introduce expertise, engagement, and originality too |
| Nunes et al. (2021) | Accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality and proficiency | • I do not find evidence of 'accuracy'; I find evidence of 'transparency', the extent to which the influencer portrays the good and the bad aspects of their life and the product<br>• I define 'originality' differently, as the extent to which the influencer genuinely uses the brand, and shows this through storytelling and sharing of personal stories<br>• I do not find evidence of 'connectedness'; I find evidence of 'engagement', the extent to which the influencer can 'influence'<br>• I further the definition of 'integrity' as having shared values with the brand<br>• I further the definition of 'proficiency' as 'expertise', and acknowledge one does not need to be an expert per se to be authentic |
| Lee and Eastin (2021) | Sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness | • I acknowledge that an influencer does not need to be an "expert" and have a "natural ability in their field", but needs to 'know what they talk about'<br>• I expand the dimension of 'uniqueness' as "not to be a copy or imitation" to originality, sharing of an original story and personal experiences. An influencer can imitate and copy content, but it is their personal storytelling style that makes them original<br>• Sincerity, truthful endorsement, and visibility both denote transparency in my definition. I extent looking beyond extrinsic motivation, and define an authentic influencer who also "has consumers best interest at heart" (integrity) and "shares the good and bad aspects of their life and the brand" (transparency)<br>• I extend their definition by also looking at 'engagement' as the extent to which the influencer has 'influence' |
| Lindmoser, Weitzl, and Zniva (2022) | Behavior in accordance with his/her true self | • I go beyond referring to authenticity as acting in accordance with their true self (part of my definition of integrity), and introduce the dimensions of expertise, originality, engagement, and transparency |

## Table 7: Properties of Influencer Authenticity

| **Property of Influencer Authenticity** | **Proposed definition of property** | **Subcomponents of authenticity property** | **Consumer** | **Brand Managers** | **Influencers** | **Influencer marketing agencies** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Expertise | The extent to which the influencer is perceived as an expert in the given field | • Influencer is a product/category expert<br>• Influencer knows what she/he is talking about | Important | Somewhat important | **Very important** | **Very important** |
| Engagement | The extent to which the influencer can 'influence' their follower base | • How many people click on the links for the product after watching the influencer's content<br>• How many people buy the product after watching the influencer's content<br>• How long people watch/consume the influencer's content<br>• Popularity and quality of followers | **Not important** | **Very important** | Somewhat important | **Very important** |
| Integrity | The extent to which influencer is perceived as being intrinsically motivated, honest to himself/herself, not acting out of his/her own financial interest, but having the consumers' best interest at heart and working with brands that align with their values | • Influencer has the consumers' best interest at heart<br>• Influencer is intrinsically motivated<br>• Honest to herself/himself<br>• Does not act in bad faith<br>• Selectivity in accordance with values | **Very important** | Somewhat important | Somewhat important | Somewhat important |
| Originality | The extent to which the influencer uses storytelling and shares personal experiences, while promoting brands they genuinely use | • Genuine brand usage<br>• Storytelling, sharing personal experiences with the recommended product offering | **Very important** | **Not important** | **Very important** | **Not important** |
| Transparency | The extent to which influencer is perceived as transparent in how they communicate with the audience, thus sharing the entire process of transformation, the good and the bad of their life and the brands they endorse, and not just perfect or desirable aspects | • Does not pretend to be someone else<br>• Shows the good/bad aspects of the product and their own life<br>• Showing the entire process of transformation | **Very important** | **Not important** | Somewhat important | Important |

## Table 8: Supporting Quotes for Each Construct of Influencer Authenticity

| Property of Influencer Authenticity | Supporting quotes for each property of influencer authenticity from all stakeholders |
|---|---|
| **Expertise** | **Consumers:**<br>▪ "I think you don't need to be a makeup artist, but you need to show that you're honest and you're like true to yourself." (CON18)<br>**Brand Managers:**<br>▪ "[if you have an advocate] those influencers would be educating kind of the rest of the oncology network around some of the new kind of key changes that are coming up when the product is licensed." (BM41)<br>**Influencers:**<br>▪ "You should have some kind of like an experience in what you do to and let's say, years of experience as well. Because, yes, some people, they just start and it seems like, oh, they've never done it before and all of a sudden, they seem to be experts. I wouldn't say I'm an expert, but having experience maybe a few years increases the credibility" (INF31)<br>**Influencer Marketing Agencies:**<br>▪ "Robert Downey Junior is going to be speaking at South by Southwest about data security, apparently. That is not an authentic influencer. Um, that's a popularity player. And I get that because data security might sound like the most boring thing on earth, but personally… If I was given that task, I'd probably be more likely to find members of Anonymous, the hacking group, than I would Robert Downey Jr. Now, some would say, but Robert Downey Junior will get to more people. I go, yeah, but will they listen to what he's saying or are they just watching because he's there? And so for me, it's always about finding some sort of… an authenticity that's directly linked to the category you're [representing] versus it's a passing interest for someone who's very famous" (IMA17) |
| **Engagement** | **Brand Managers:**<br>▪ "We look at aspects like the engagement rate, past collaborations, customer feedback on their work, and their communication" (BM11)<br>▪ "I try to bring a doctor in who's less influential but is more in those kind of smaller hospitals, and then the audience can relate. So for me, it's not around what they say, honestly, it's around the reach that we can get with those doctors." (BM41)<br>**Influencers:**<br>"Always the non-branded content that gets more engagement and exposure because I just feel like whenever people see all this as an ad, they like instantly they get a bit of, Oh, it's paid for thing or advertisement. So I always feel like the branded ones perform much worse" (INF31)<br>**Influencer Marketing Agencies:**<br>▪ "You have a following and get engagement. I would say that people interact with that type of content. Then you're an expert within the content" (IMA1)<br>▪ "The goal of the brand is to kind of piggyback on the influencers brands." (IMA1) |
| **Integrity** | **Consumers:**<br>▪ "That they are free of commercial influence, or at the minimum declare when an ad is happening" (CON111)<br>**Brand Managers:**<br>▪ "You want them [influencers] to be relatable… be in alignment with your brand" (BM11)<br>**Influencers:**<br>▪ "I also think that followers are quite sensitive… if you constantly just promote something. So that's why I also think it's important to be selective and maybe don't do it as often and really pick, because then it seems like you're constantly just selling something and they just won't trust you."(INF31)<br>**Influencer Marketing Agencies:**<br>▪ "An authentic influencer is not someone who works with everyone, purely for the money, not for their own brand image" (IMA3) |

| | |
|---|---|
| | ▪ “I think it's like if you're doing and talking about something that really is an extension of who you are and how you communicate, then you are authentic…. So you're sticking to your values, how you usually communicate and being true to yourself, then you're authentic.” (IMA1) |
| **Originality** | **Consumers:**<br>▪ “So, there's this guy who is kind of an influencer, he has like 100,000 followers on Instagram, and when I might talk about him with friends he’s always like a little joke because he’s all about making some quick cash and just promoting whatever. The other day he was promoting men’s makeup. And we have seen him out and just never wears makeup, and this is like it's unrelatable, he is not even using it, it’s not believable at all.” (CON39)<br>▪ “I saw a good example…of an influencer, like posting something and saying, oh, I love this product. But [the influencer] wasn't trying to sell it. It did say #adv but just because she had worked with the brand previously, but it also showed that she no longer works with them, but she still posts about them. So that, in my opinion, is authentic.” (CON18)<br>**Brand Managers:**<br>▪ “From a brand’s perspective, an influencer is someone, who … is not only providing value to their audience but is also doing something unique… what we look for is someone that is creating content” (BM11)<br>**Influencers:**<br>▪ “We have done content for clients who sometimes just want us to talk all about their product benefits and sell their products, and in the end, we feel the final content does not represent us and who we are. When this happens, we will inform the clients that this video would be better off only featured on their branded media platforms instead of our [YouTube] channel because we know that our audience would not resonate with it and the video will perform poorly.” (INF2)<br>▪ “We recently filmed content for a property developer over lockdown with the idea that it would look like a ‘Modern Family’ type script. However, because the client wanted us to cover many of the property’s selling points, I felt that the video did not live up to our creative intentions. In the end, the video views and metric performance were only mediocre.” (INF8)<br>**Influencer Marketing Agencies:**<br>• “If it's a creator that 90% [of the time] works with brands that they like, and then 10% works with some brands that they aren't necessarily big fans of, but they managed to integrate it into their life and their content in a very natural way. And then it's fine… [still authentic]” (IMA3) |
| **Transparency** | **Consumers:**<br>▪ “[the influencer needs to be] very open, give advice through her experiences, open up about experiences, you feel like you know this person a bit”. (CON21)<br>▪ “One of the car reviewers that I enjoy watching often expresses his own views, especially in the way he gives his judgement about the car. There is no perfect product, so I like it when they express their honest opinion and what they might be neutral about so that I can make my own judgement.” (CON16)<br>**Influencers**<br>▪ “I try to be authentic and maybe share even things that it's not always perfect or always the highlights, but also basically the other side, which I think makes you more authentic and then brings you closer to people because they see all you are a normal human being as we all are with all the problems and downsides. So I'd say as much as I can, but also I don't really share everything or too much because that's not how I am.” (INF31)<br>▪ “I think, is somebody who's not acting. They're just being themselves and talking about what interests them or what they care about and doing it from the heart instead of trying to do it for the sake of getting brands to sign on.” (INF31)<br>**Influencer Marketing Agencies:**<br>▪ “Well, what I've seen, at least with some bigger ones [influencers] that have been really authentic about up and downs. They almost quit with some of the channels because it's taking so much it takes a lot to share and that everybody knows who you are.” (IMA1)<br>▪ “If you are a MarTech influencer, people don't really want to know about your personal life. They want to know about your advice and the reviews that you're doing.” (IMA3)<br>▪ “[sharing all aspects of your life] used to be a driver of authenticity. But now it's a driver of inauthenticity. You can see all this stuff. You go, Yeah, Is that true?” (IMA17) |

### *Expertise*

The first property of the influencer assemblage that I identify in this study is influencer's expertise, which I define as "the extent to which the influencer is perceived as an expert in the given field". More specifically, expertise reflects whether the influencer is a product or category expert, as well as whether the influencer knows what they talk about. Lee and Eastin (2021, p. 831) describe this aspect of authenticity as "being skilled in their field", "being knowledgeable in their field", and "demonstrating a natural ability in their field", while Kapitan et al. (2021) define it as 'legitimacy' when it comes to content creation.

The findings suggest that influencers perceive their expertise in a certain domain as a very important property of their assemblage identity. Nevertheless, influencers do not describe expertise in the strict sense of the word. For example, they do not think they need to be a highly educated professional. However, they do think they need to have a good understanding of their field. For instance, INF31, who is a food influencer, told us that while she is not by any means a cook, she has been making home-made delicacies and posting recipes for over 5 years now, and that is the type of content her audience expects from her:

> "You should have years of experience in what you do. Because some influencers have never done [something] before and all of a sudden, they seem to be experts. Having years of experience increases the credibility" (INF31)

A provocative finding is that while expertise is a very important property of the influencer assemblage for the influencer, it is less important for the other components in the assemblage. Consistent with the definition provided by Parmentier and Fisher (2015), I define consumers as audience members who pay attention to and follow influencers' content, as well as those who are merely occasional viewers. In the study, consumers reiterate that influencers do not need to be experts in the strict sense of the word (for instance, an influencer does not need to be a professional make-up artist to be to able give authentic make-up advice). What is important for consumers is that the influencer knows what they are talking about:

> "Authenticity does not mean expertise, in the very strict sense of the word. Someone could be authentic and be like 'Hey, I'm gonna come here and show you how I do my makeup and you know, I'm just learning myself, let's learn together'. That's very authentic". (CON39)

Consumers trust influencers who have been consistently posting about a topic. For instance, as CON39 indicated, if the influencer is known for trying out new trends, that can be labelled as their expertise. As CON39 put it: "Do I go to you for that kind of advice?" In contrast, influencers who dip in and out of categories are viewed as less authentic. CON1 told us about an influencer who often featured high-end beauty products. CON1 felt the influencer lost authenticity when she made a post recommending a new range of shampoos with SPF protection. This was problematic to CON1: she was skeptical about the product's claims and benefits, and she wondered why the influencer failed to address this important question and blindly promoted a cheap retail shampoo instead of her usual high-end brands. Consequently, CON1 rejected both the brand and the influencer. Therefore, key to be perceived as an expert, according to consumers, is consistently publishing content on a given topic. In addition, consumers find content where the influencer shares their struggles (e.g., their first steps of a personal journey) often more believable than their 'expert advice':

> "[The influencer] did a video just counting how many tiles he broke. And he was supposed to be an expert. And he just, that's like very relatable because you're like, oh yeah, if that was me trying this, I would break it a thousand times. So instead of having to watch a content where someone is faking that he just could get it done in the first try, he is showing you, look, I'm being authentic, I fail as well. You can relate to this." (CON39)

A further provocative finding of this study is that brand managers only find expertise relevant if it enables the influencer to engage their community and drive favorable return on investment. BM11, owner of a sustainable lifestyle brand, indicated that she is now turning to workout class instructors to advertise her brand. As people 'love' the classes provided by these teachers, they will trust them and the brands they recommend: "they get to tap into this community of people that trust them, and [can] transmit their advice… it's like word-of-mouth" (BM11). Similarly, a brand manager in the pharma industry noted that she partners with doctors to share knowledge about a new pharma product on the market. However, BM41 noted a challenge in the pharma industry: due to its highly regulated nature, influencers cannot be told what to talk about. To mitigate the danger of paying an influencer who would not endorse their product, BM41 now works with a list of influencers who can drive favorable engagement amongst their audience:

> "Being totally transparent, I may not use certain speakers over other speakers for sure. I had a doctor one time who loved getting involved with lots of people [companies]. But I have had a situation where I was asking him to talk about my product, but there was another product that was launching and he used the time to speak about the other product. That's fine, but it's not what my objective was. So I may not use him again." (BM41)

Therefore, the findings indicate that brands, when exercising their capacity to contract and work with influencers, look for influencers who manage to engage their audience and drive a favorable return on their investment. Agencies, on the other hand, actively look for expertise when it comes to influencers. As one of the respondents put it: "It is their expertise that makes you trust them" (IMA3), and it is their "credibility in the given field they represent that makes them authentic" (IMA17). Expertise, according to members of the influencer marketing agencies, relates to the influencers' long-standing history of creating impactful content on a certain topic. As IMA1 noted:

> "What is perceived as an ad is very much dependent on the format the influencer uses. Sometimes they don't actually use the brand before the collaboration, but if they are able to present the brand in a way that is consistent with what they have been doing, it will feel less of an ad and make it more believable… It also needs to be something that you are creating content about. Because if I for example start doing makeup now but I'm doing tech reviews, you're like 'why would you do that?" (IMA1)

Assemblages are not stable but are often characterized by conflicting interests and goals that can create tensions in the assemblage and impact its identity (DeLanda 2006). I found an apparent tension between certain components when it comes to expertise as an assemblage property. While brand managers do not define an authentic influencer in terms of their expertise, influencers, in contrast, place a lot of emphasis on their own expertise. The current findings show that expertise does not mean that the influencer must be a certified professional, but that the influencer has been consistently producing content in the given category, and consumers trust the influencer's advice in that given field. Influencer marketing agencies try to manage this tension through their capacity to recommend influencers who are consistently creating content within a certain domain.

### ***Engagement***

The second critical property of the influencer assemblage is engagement, which relates to the extent to which the influencer can 'influence'[4] their follower base[5]. According to the brand managers and influencer marketing agencies in this study, engagement is the most important property of the influencer assemblage, contributing to the authenticity of the assemblage: "[We look at] aspects like the engagement rate, past collaborations, customer feedback on their work, and their communication" (BM11). Based on the interview findings, the most important metrics involve influencer's popularity (quality of content and videos, number of followers, number of views on content) and 'quality of followers'. What differentiates an authentic from an inauthentic influencer, according to BM11, is the engagement level the influencer receives. While comments for authentic influencers show interest in the influencer's life, comments for inauthentic influencers are more superficial:

> "I look at how engaged the followers are, how many saves she has on Instagram, how many people share her content, are people engaged in asking questions, they want to know what you are doing, what you are wearing, what do you think about a matter?" (BM41)

Thus, brand managers mostly look at the influencer's likes, shares and engagement:

> "If an influencer has 300,000 followers, whose videos are viewed 15,000 times a day vis-à-vis an influencer with 2,000,000 followers and whose videos are watched 30,000 times a day, then Influencer 1 is seen as a 'higher quality' influencer and more authentic" (BM42)

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[4] In the subsequent iteration of the paper, I also include the notion of connectedness. More specifically, I argue that connectedness, in the eyes of consumers, stems from the closeness they feel to the influencer's content, and sometimes they are even transformed by it, due to the influencer's relatability. Consumers mentioned feelings of "relatability" and a "sense of community" as elements that stabilize the assemblage. As CON19 expressed, being authentic means "being relatable".

[5] In subsequent iterations of the paper, I refer to connectedness as an element of authenticity, and engagement as an outcome of authenticity. I define connectedness as the extent to which consumers feel connected to and engage with the influencer. Nevertheless, brand managers tend to value the outcome of connectedness, which is engagement: how many people click on, interact with, and watch the influencer's content and buy the product promoted. Critically, an emergent theme from the interviews is that brand managers value engagement as an outcome of authenticity but lack an understanding on how connectedness stabilizes the influencer assemblage.

Critically, while engagement is a key property driving the authenticity of the influencer assemblage, influencers believe that engagement stems from their expertise. INF32 (an influencer in the field of trading cards), feels that consumers go to his TikTok channel to learn more about trading cards. However, he also claims that he manages to maintain his authenticity through his personality and by fostering engagement amongst his follower base:

> “There's an education component. I've had a lot of people say that it makes them happy when they wake up in the morning and they see a new video from me, because I'm just a very positive guy. I think that [the content] is educational, but I think also it's just my personality” (INF32)

Influencer marketing agencies have a similar viewpoint. They also see engagement as an outcome of expertise. As IMA1 put it: “You actually have impact. You have a following and get engagement, people interact with that type of content. Then you're an expert within the content”. IMA17 shared the same belief, arguing that first and foremost, the influencer should be respected in their field, and the economic benefits will follow:

> “Authenticity is born from you and how you live without an eye on popularity, without an eye on financial benefit. It is a quest that you believe in. It's not about how many people like you. It's about how respected you are with the people that matter.” (IMA17)

When recommending influencers for brand partnerships, agencies first filter influencers in terms of engagement, then look at influencers’ expertise, while brand managers are more focused on favorable returns on investment, and hence, do not prioritize other metrics apart from engagement. Therefore, I notice a critical tension between two components of the assemblage: the influencers and the brand managers. While an influencer’s engagement levels are the single most important property of the assemblage’s authenticity according to brand managers, influencers, on the other hand, do not link their authenticity to engagement metrics. What is important for authentic influencers is that they stand out from the crowd through their expertise. Influencers, however, do know how important engagement is for brand managers. They see engagement as a means to an end; they know they can get more favorable brand partnerships if their followers are engaged:

> "It's important to build some kind of relationship with your audience, so they know you as a person. And I think if you build that relationship, they're more likely to trust you. If you recommend something, [then they will know] it is really good rather than if they don't know you that well [they won't trust your recommendations]" (INF31)

Many influencers I interviewed noted that they are often expected to adapt a tracking system that enables brand managers to track the click-through rate, download rate and other engagement metrics of their content. Interestingly, I found that Asian influencers are particularly averse to using tracking systems, because they feel it entails giving up control over their content and posts to brand managers (e.g., INF39). Some of these influencers also believe it increases the brand managers' bargaining power and diminishes their own position in the assemblage (e.g., INF40). This was also confirmed by brand managers in China, such as BM45, who noted that some influencers will resist the use of tracking systems because they do not want to grant brands access to such a transparent way of evaluating their performance. While some Chinese influencers may be persuaded to add a tracking link to their content, I found that Korean influencers feel even more strongly against them and will fiercely resist their adoption. In fact, it would anger them if brand managers ask for a tracking link below the branded content (INF36, INF40).

### ***Integrity***

The third vital property of the influencer assemblage I observe in this study is integrity, which I define as the extent to which an influencer is perceived to be intrinsically motivated, honest to himself/herself, does not act in bad faith, is not driven by financial interest, has consumers' best interest at heart, and selects brand partnerships that are in accordance with the influencer's values. According to consumers, the integrity of the influencer is a very important property of the influencer assemblage. This is because consumers prefer to interact with influencers who produce content with the consumer's best interest at heart. This genuine appreciation will also manifest itself in the way influencers talk about and showcase a product. As CON220 noted, authentic influencers "might have spoken about the product or service even before the brand approached them for a partnership". CON116 noted that authentic influencers are not only intrinsically motivated, but are also honest: "We trust influencers who are authentic in their content, meaning the influencers' opinions are honest and reflect their real beliefs and values". This is in line with Kapitan et al.'s (2022) view of an authentic influencer as someone who acts in accordance with one's values, preferences and needs.

Influencers who are seen as creating branded content outside their usual norms or values face perceptions of inauthenticity because they appear to be driven primarily by financial interest (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard 2020; Shan et al. 2020). Consumers are increasingly suspicious of what they feel are attempts to bias influencers' opinions or outright 'buy' their approval. For example, CON2 worried about the authenticity of influencers who receive and review expensive products gifted to them, as there may be a fundamental bias towards inflating the positives and downplaying the negatives. CON11 had a similar view: "When you are paid to say something, there is an incentive to promote the product versus when you are not being paid. Then your only incentive is to get people to use a product without acting in your own self-interest." This finding is in line with prior research, wherein authentic influencers have been described as 'passionate influencers', driven by inner passion and not financial objectives (Audrezet, de Kerviler and Moulard 2020).

Consumers also define inauthentic influencers as those that tend to work with every brand that approaches them. While consumers do not expect influencers not to get paid for their partnerships, they do expect authentic influencers to be selective and subtle about it:

> "There are influencers who don't make it as obvious that they're getting paid for [posting] something. They might be getting sent clothes or makeup, and they might not go out there and say [which brand it is]. But they'll just post something on it and then just say that it's that brand when they're asked about it, which I think makes it a bit more authentic." (CON18)

Even if influencers are not free of financial interest, at least they should declare it, according to CON111. Nevertheless, having too many ads, according to CON19, just "feels very fake, everything is like #ad so I just skip it". Influencers, like consumers, are vary of being perceived as being financially driven, and not acting with integrity, but also face the dilemma of having to work and promote brands for the next paycheck:

> "We all have bills to pay. When do I still feel myself working with a brand? They [brands] may have their own desires. When often I would like to try something else. There is a danger of it all feeling like prostitution." (INF17)

Influencers are wary of the number of brands they collaborate with, and the impact it can have on their followers' perception of their personal brand. Most influencers are aware that collaborating with too many brands can undermine their perceived authenticity in the eyes of their followers:

> "Followers are quite sensitive if you constantly just promote something. That's why I also think it's important to be selective and don't do it as often and really pick, because then it seems like you're constantly just selling something, and they just won't trust you." (INF31)

Influencers often believe they should only work with brands that their followers might be interested in. This signals that they are not only financially motivated, but have their followers' best interest at heart. As INF31 noted:

> "I would only accept the ones that either I really like the product, or I think people might like it or it's something cool. But I wouldn't really accept just like… any kind of collaboration."

Influencer marketing agencies and brands, on the other hand, do not tend to mention whether the influencer is intrinsically motivated, honest, and has the consumers' best interest at heart when defining an authentic influencer. A dominant view among the agencies and brand managers I studied is that influencers work with brands for their "next payroll" (BM11), often work "purely for the money, not for their own brand image" (IMA3), and that "they are just doing it for the money, they don't really care" (IMA3). However, while brands and influencer marketing agencies believe that influencers are largely financially motivated, they are also aware that this may cause a problem for the image of the brands they promote:

> "We don't want to work with people who are like, this is the product that they post a… ton of, like different brands of hair gummies. Because it's very clear that they are just getting money for it. It's not that they're working with a brand that's true to who they are." (IMA3)

Influencer marketing agencies and brand managers want to leverage consumers' positive associations with the influencer. If the influencer is seen as 'working with every brand', that may harm consumers' associations of not only the influencer, but the brand too. As IMA1 put it: "the goal of the brand is to kind of piggyback on the influencers brands." To overcome this challenge, brands and influencers look for an alignment in values:

> "Because if you're if you're putting your brand in [a campaign with] someone, you want them [influencers] to be relatable… be in alignment with your brand. If an influencer is wearing [this brand], and they don't have those values [that the brand has] we can see that [the influencer] is just wearing it to promote something. People turn away from these products, because they can buy a similar product from another brand too. How can I trust that this is actually good, if this [influencer] is promoting other similar brands too?" (BM11)

While consumers perceive influencer integrity as a key driver of their authenticity, the other components of the assemblage believe the question, and thereby the property, of integrity is more complex. As influencers tend to make a living from promoting brands, there is a tension between consumers and all three other components of the assemblage when it comes to integrity. As branded content in the influencer assemblage has expressive capacity (i.e., conveying meaning; Canniford and Shankar 2013; DeLanda 2006; 2016), it can either improve or tarnish consumers' attitudes towards the influencer assemblage. To ensure that the expressive components positively impact the attitudes towards the assemblage, all components involved in the assemblage should work together. More specifically, influencers should act with their capacity to only work with brands they genuinely think their audience would appreciate, while influencer marketing agencies and brand managers should act in their capacity to contract influencers whose values are aligned with those of the brand.

### *Originality*

The fourth critical property of the influencer assemblage I identify is originality, which I define as the extent to which the influencer uses storytelling and shares personal experiences, while promoting brands they genuinely use. The literature has widely defined an authentic entity as one that is "genuine, real and/or true" (Beverland and Farrelly 2010), or one that is true to themselves (Morhart et al. 2015; Moulard, Garrity, and Rice 2014). From the consumers' perspective, one of the most important drivers of influencers' authenticity is whether they genuinely use the product they promote. As CON215 put it: “I see people who say they use something but don't, as inauthentic. They just want to get the money from a sponsor but don't use or like the product.” Similarly, CON100 noted:

> “The influencer believes in the product, uses the product, and feels right in their heart to advertise the product. If they promote themselves as a hiker or car lover, it's something they actually love to do.” (CON100)

Consumers see through influencers who act opportunistically and post merely for financial gain without actually using the product. For example, CON18 stated that if the influencer does not use the product being promoted, the perceived authenticity of both the influencer and the content decreases:

> “She [influencer] is super famous on TikTok and she did this mascara review and at the end she was wearing full lashes. That's just killing your authenticity because you're saying this mascara is great, but you can clearly see the difference.” (CON18)

Consumers indicated that branded content could appear authentic if the influencer uses the brand outside of the brand partnership, and not just for the sake of promotion:

> “I saw a good example…of an influencer, like posting something and saying, oh, I love this product. But [the influencer] wasn't trying to sell it. It did say #adv but just because she had worked with the brand previously, but it also showed that she no longer works with them, but she still posts about them. So that, in my opinion, is authentic. Because even though they have stopped working together, she's still buying the product and using it. Same goes when the influencer has worked with the brand [in the past], but purchased again or when they post something, but they make it clear that they are not being paid for it.” (CON18)

Influencers themselves also agree that genuinely using the brand is a key property of their authenticity. This ensures, for example, that they are truly aware of a product’s quality and can attest to its effectiveness. As INF13 put it, “I only work with brands that I use because I know the quality of their products”. Storytelling and sharing of personal experiences are another subcomponent of an influencer’s originality. More specifically, an authentic influencer is one who shares their own experiences with their followers. As CON21 explained: “[the influencer needs to be] very open, give advice through her experiences, open up about experiences, you feel like you know this person a bit”. Showing these unique personal experiences with the product offering contributes to influencer's authenticity, as well as to the authenticity of the branded content created:

> "having it in the background or like showing how to use it and actually using it. So, if it was a makeup, I wouldn't just post and say, this is great, but show how you use it." (CON18)

There seems to be an apparent tension between influencers' desire to create original content and the brand's encroachment on the influencers' content. Consumers expect influencers to not simply rehash a brand message, while brands often specify brand-related requirements and content preferences in detail. This leaves the influencer to establish their originality in the eyes of consumers, as well as to maintain their unique storytelling style that helps them differentiate their personal brand from other influencers:

> "Your face has a shelf life. You start as a personality, and the challenge is to make your personality interesting whatever phase of life you grow into because the minute people are no longer interested in you, the synergy [between the influencer and brands] disappears, and you can be replaced. So, the best work on our platform has been when we are free to write, free to make stories, and free to express our signature storytelling style." (INF1)

The interviews suggest that a brand's desire to be at the center of a given content to maximize visibility frequently conflicts with influencers' desire to express their creative freedom and generate high engagement amongst followers. Influencers are adamant to accept such brand partnerships; as INF13 noted, "I have gotten proposals where they want me to say certain things in the caption, I normally reject those." Similarly, INF31 shared the same belief: "I think as creators we should have a certain freedom of how we want to put things together". The influencer respondents indicated that they would decline such brand partnerships, as they would not perform well, and would not resonate with their follower base, because the content lacks the influencers' own, unique storytelling style:

> "We have done content for clients who sometimes just want us to talk all about their product benefits and sell their products, and in the end, we feel the final content does not represent us and who we are. When this happens, we will inform the clients that this video would be better off featured on their branded media platforms instead of our [YouTube] channel because we know that our audience would not resonate with it and the video will perform poorly." (INF2)

Influencer marketing agencies and brands, in contrast, did not emphasize genuine brand usage or sharing of stories and personal experiences as important properties of influencers' authenticity. Even if they do believe that showing genuine product usage can increase the credibility of the partnership, and the authenticity of the branded content created, to them originality is not an important property when selecting authentic influencers. The story of BM40 is a good example to illustrate this point. BM40 gave a make-up micro-influencer with great engagement levels a gift, consisting of a pair of jeans from the brand's fashion ecommerce website. The influencer integrated the jeans (and thus the brand) into their everyday life, which yielded unprecedented returns for the company:

> "She just posted a picture in our jeans. After a couple of the days, she was showing something else [on her stories], and she was in the same jeans. And the same day she went to an event, and she wore the same jeans again, but with a fancy blouse… she texted me saying that no one was asking about the blouse, everyone was asking her about the jeans because they saw how she combines them [for different events]. She posted on Instagram stories her picture with this [pair of] jeans… saying 'you guys ask a lot about these jeans, so I decided to publish where I got it from' and then it boomed… all jeans were sold within three days." (BM40)

While brand managers often want to have a say in the way influencers share their experiences, influencers tend to push for their own story-telling style. Influencer marketing agencies have a more thorough understanding of the type of branded content that performs better and can often direct brand managers to appreciate the importance of showing personal experiences with the brand. As IMA13 stated: "We understand influencers' desire to create their own content. It is important to build bridges with brands for both the influencer and the brand to succeed in this." Influencers are wary of working with influencer marketing agencies, as they do not always appreciate the role they play. As INF5 put it:

> "The agency is just a middleman. There is no point of having them as creative leads when we are the creators who developed the concept, script, and content. It is easier for clients to come to us directly because one-way communication would help us answer their brief better."

Originality is a very important property in the influencer assemblage for both the consumer and the influencer. Consumers believe that the content created by influencers has an expressive capacity and should be used to promote genuine usage experiences and the sharing of personal stories (e.g., DeLanda 2006; Parmentier and Fisher 2015). Similarly, influencers value their creative freedom, and strive to bring their unique perspectives to life through the expressive capacity of the content they produce. Brands, however, believe it is in their capacity to push for less personal storytelling, and more pre-scripted branded content. Influencer marketing agencies understand the tension between the two components: they appreciate the expressive capacity of branded content, but do not believe that influencer authenticity should be contingent on the influencer's genuine brand usage and storytelling.

### ***Transparency***

The fifth and final property of the influencer assemblage I identify in this study is transparency, defined as the extent to which the influencer communicates with their audience transparently, thus sharing the good and the bad of their life and the brands they endorse, and not just a perfect or desirable aspect (Liu et al. 2015). Transparency is a critical property of the influencer assemblage for consumers, who expect an authentic influencer to have the expressive capacity to be honest and not pretend to be someone else. This may involve posting unscripted, unedited pictures (CON22), "pictures of acne, being real, not 'instagrammy" (CON19), and staying true to the image you are trying to create: "if you're a fitness influencer it means staying fit and in shape" (CON94). As CON21 put it, the influencer needs to be "open, give advice through her experiences, open up about experiences, you feel like you know this person a bit". Influencers, by showing their imperfections, and the reality of their lives can boost their authenticity, as they become more relatable in the eyes of their followers. As CON19 expressed, being authentic means "being vulnerable in the public eye and what you are willing to share, showing that is not just the highlight of your life, but it's your real life… relatable". Transparency does not only involve sharing the hardships, but sharing the entire process of transformation, rather than just a picture posing with the product. In fact, consumers believe that influencers who are willing to show the whole process of using the product for months are perceived as more authentic:

> "Usually, if an influencer has tried the product over say three months and can show me a before and after to demonstrate the effect, then I am certainly more inclined to buy it since I can see the comparison and the person has tried it." (CON8)

Influencers are conflicted when it comes to sharing their honest beliefs or giving followers candid insights into their lives. The influencer respondents indicated that to be truly authentic as an influencer, you should not be acting and pretending to be someone else. INF32 defined himself as an authentic influencer because he always stays "true to himself" and noted that his more inauthentic colleagues do not share what they truly think, but "pretend to be someone else". However, many influencers I interviewed indicated that they feel conflicted about letting their followers into their lives, especially if they are introverted:

> "I try to be authentic and maybe share even things that it's not always perfect or always the highlights, but also basically the other side, which I think makes you more authentic and then brings you closer to people because they see all you are a normal human being as we all are with all the problems and downsides. So I'd say as much as I can, but also I don't really share everything or too much because that's not how I am." (INF31)

Similarly, influencer marketing agencies pointed to instances when sharing aspects of one's life is not a necessary property of the assemblage. As both IMA1 and IMA3 noted, whether influencers should share candid insights into their life depends on the field they are in. If you are a lifestyle influencer, who has gained a following by sharing your daily routine and lifestyle, then letting followers into your daily life is clearly a necessity. However, if you are an influencer in a more technical niche (such as video games or MarTech), influencer marketing agencies believe you do not have to share insights about your life to stay authentic. IMA1 noted that many influencers 'burn out' in the process of oversharing, while IMA17 indicated that sharing so much about one's personal life, is, in fact, a sign of inauthenticity:

> "[sharing all aspects of your life] used to be a driver of authenticity. But now it's … feels like it's a driver of inauthenticity these days. You can see all this stuff. You go, Yeah, Is that true? And that's why for me, the fundamental element is vulnerability and relatability. A lot of work tends to try and be a mirror for a life you don't have. Or they try so hard to mirror your life that it feels fake. But when you show that you are feeling shit at times. I think that's something that that to me is more authentic." (IMA17)

Interestingly, brand managers did not identify transparency as an important property of an influencer's authenticity. In fact, the findings suggest that brands tend to be wary of transparency, as they do not necessarily want influencers to share the shortcomings of an endorsed product. An unbiased and truthful endorsement can create a tension between authentic influencers and brands. Simply put, brands may not want to dilute the unique selling points of their products, while influencers may not want to lie to their audience. As INF31 indicated, when she did not enjoy a meal at a restaurant that paid for her visit, she just left details of that meal out of her review. INF11 believed that a crucial requirement in product reviews is to be diplomatic in what she does not like:

> "I used to punish products that I do not like and give them terrible reviews, but eventually I realized that sometimes people do have different tastes, and even if I do not like it, my viewers might not agree! Therefore, I learned to be more diplomatic in my dissent. Instead of saying that a mascara is useless because it is not dark enough, I will say it gives a very light cover which is not right for my style, but people who like a lighter look might prefer this." (INF11)

Consumers, on the other hand, often find glowing influencer reviews about products less believable than those that contain negative statements about the product. Thus, I find evidence of the benefits of performance transparency (Liu et al. 2015) and of the blemishing effect (Ein-Gar, Shiv and Tormala 2012): branded content is labelled as more reliable if the influencer also shares some minor negative information about the endorsed product:

> "One of the car reviewers that I enjoy watching often expresses his own views, especially in the way he gives his judgement about the car. There is no perfect product, so I like it when they express their honest opinion so that I can make my own judgement." (CON16)

As branded content has an expressive capacity to influence followers, but also to provide a livelihood for influencers, influencers face a tension that impacts the authenticity of the assemblage. While they do want to uphold their transparency, they also want to be able to manage what they share, and how they share it. The inherent tension of truthful endorsement should be managed by both the influencer and the brand. Brands have a vested interest in influencers not damaging the brand's image with a negative review, while influencers may feel in debt to the brand, and hence, often withdraw negative information from consumers. To manage this tension, brands should not expect the influencer to withhold truthful information, but the influencer should not work with a brand they cannot promote truthfully.

# Discussion

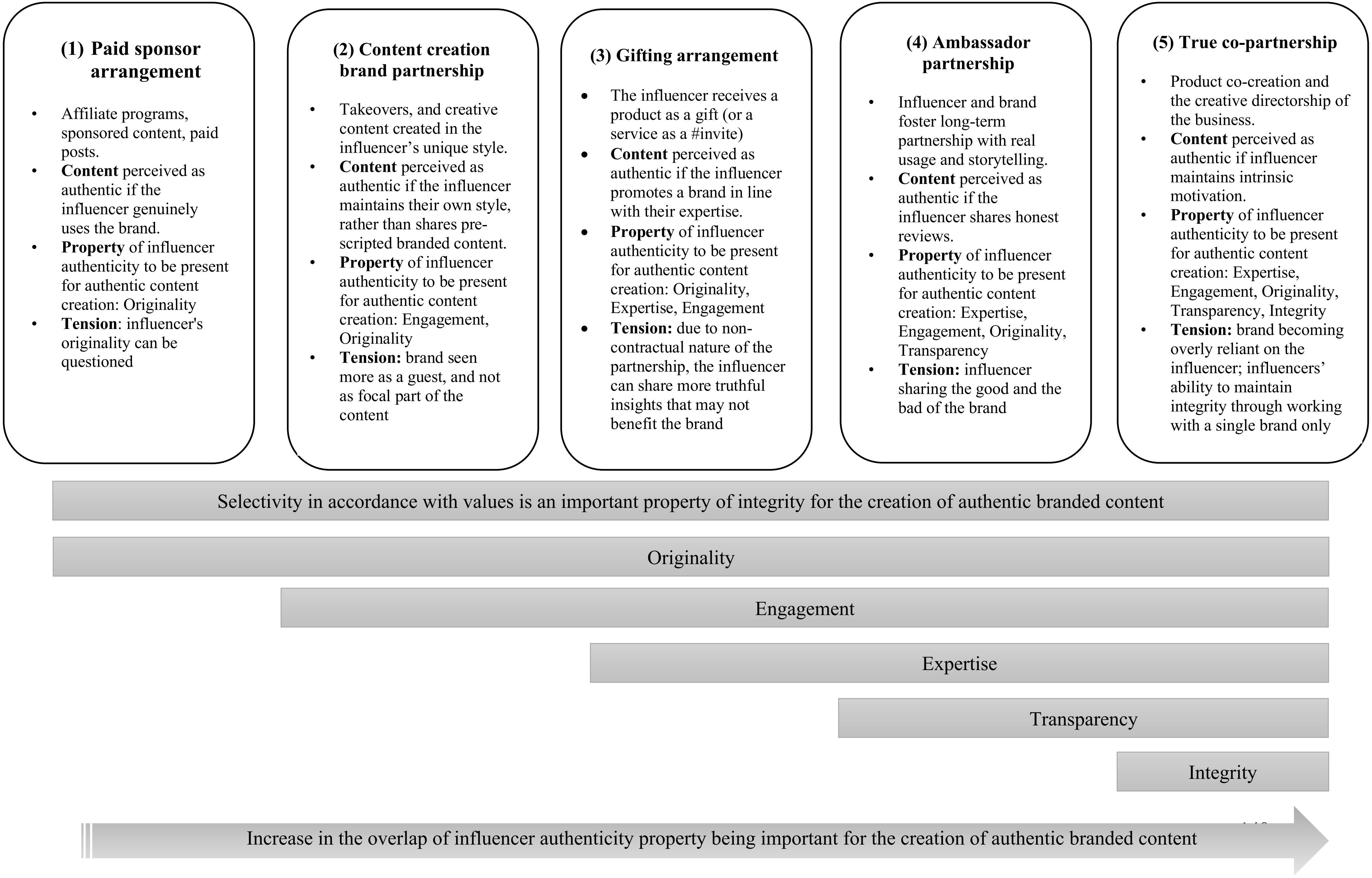
Having established what key properties of the influencer assemblage function as drivers of influencer's authenticity, I now turn to answering the question of what this means for managing influencer-brand partnerships and for creating authentic branded content. As branded content has an expressive capacity, it can either improve or tarnish one's attitudes towards the influencer assemblage. Thus, to understand how brands and influencers may work together to create authentic branded content, I offer a 'Branded Content Authenticity Spectrum', depicted in Figure 15. The spectrum outlines what it means for branded content to be perceived as authentic, given the nature of the influencer-brand partnership.

More specifically, as capacities depend on properties of components in the assemblage (DeLanda 2006), I argue that the authenticity of the expressive capacities depends on the properties of the assemblage itself, as well as the interaction of the assemblage components. Importantly, I do not propose that branded content only has the capacity to be perceived as authentic if all authenticity properties of the influencer assemblage are present, but rather shed light on the fact that for a certain type of influencer-brand partnership to be perceived as authentic, certain properties of influencer authenticity need to be present in the assemblage. I note that the alignment of the influencer's and brand's values is pivotal for the creation of authentic branded content. The value set of influencers and brands need to be aligned, otherwise a perfectly authentic collaboration can bring about inauthentic perceptions:

> "You can have a very authentic influencer and brand, but their messages don't work together, their values [do] not match. So then through that it becomes inauthentic". (CON19)

Thus, a novel perspective arising from the study is that irrespective of the nature of the influencer-brand partnership, the branded content will only be perceived as authentic if the values of the influencer and the brand are also aligned. In the following sections, I examine each form of influencer-brand relationship, ranging from more short-term, sponsor arrangements to long-term co-partnerships, through the lens of assemblage theory. Figure 15 visualizes the range of partnerships, Figure 16 provides examples of content for each spectrum, and Table 9 provides relevant data excerpts.

**Figure 15: Branded Content Authenticity Spectrum Depicting the Range of Influencer-Brand Partnerships**



**(1) Paid sponsor arrangement**

- Affiliate programs, sponsored content, paid posts.
- **Content** perceived as authentic if the influencer genuinely uses the brand.
- **Property** of influencer authenticity to be present for authentic content creation: Originality
- **Tension**: influencer's originality can be questioned

**(2) Content creation brand partnership**

- Takeovers, and creative content created in the influencer's unique style.
- **Content** perceived as authentic if the influencer maintains their own style, rather than shares pre-scripted branded content.
- **Property** of influencer authenticity to be present for authentic content creation: Engagement, Originality
- **Tension:** brand seen more as a guest, and not as focal part of the content

**(3) Gifting arrangement**

- The influencer receives a product as a gift (or a service as a #invite)
- **Content** perceived as authentic if the influencer promotes a brand in line with their expertise.
- **Property** of influencer authenticity to be present for authentic content creation: Originality, Expertise, Engagement
- **Tension:** due to non-contractual nature of the partnership, the influencer can share more truthful insights that may not benefit the brand

**(4) Ambassador partnership**

- Influencer and brand foster long-term partnership with real usage and storytelling.
- **Content** perceived as authentic if the influencer shares honest reviews.
- **Property** of influencer authenticity to be present for authentic content creation: Expertise, Engagement, Originality, Transparency
- **Tension:** influencer sharing the good and the bad of the brand

**(5) True co-partnership**

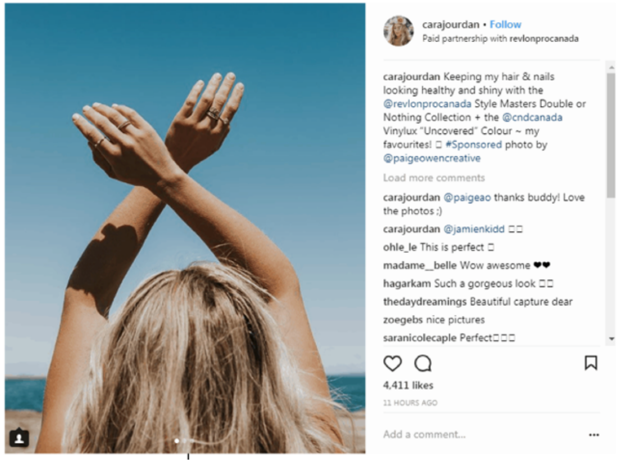
- Product co-creation and the creative directorship of the business.
- **Content** perceived as authentic if influencer maintains intrinsic motivation.
- **Property** of influencer authenticity to be present for authentic content creation: Expertise, Engagement, Originality, Transparency, Integrity
- **Tension:** brand becoming overly reliant on the influencer; influencers' ability to maintain integrity through working with a single brand only

Selectivity in accordance with values is an important property of integrity for the creation of authentic branded content

Originality
Engagement
Expertise
Transparency
Integrity
Increase in the overlap of influencer authenticity property being important for the creation of authentic branded content

# Figure 16: Branded Content examples

**Figure 16A**
**Paid sponsor arrangement example**



carajourdan • Follow
Paid partnership with revlonprocanada

carajourdan Keeping my hair & nails looking healthy and shiny with the @revlonprocanada Style Masters Double or Nothing Collection + the @cndcanada Vinylux "Uncovered" Colour ~ my favourites! □ #Sponsored photo by @paigeowencreative

Load more comments

carajourdan @paigeao thanks buddy! Love the photos ;)

carajourdan @jamienkidd □□

ohle_le This is perfect □

madame__belle Wow awesome ❤❤

hagarkam Such a gorgeous look □□

thedaydreamings Beautiful capture dear

zoegebs nice pictures

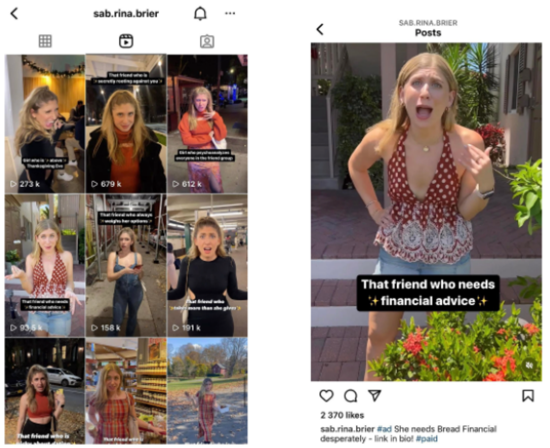
saranicolecaple Perfect□□□

4,411 likes

11 HOURS AGO

Add a comment...

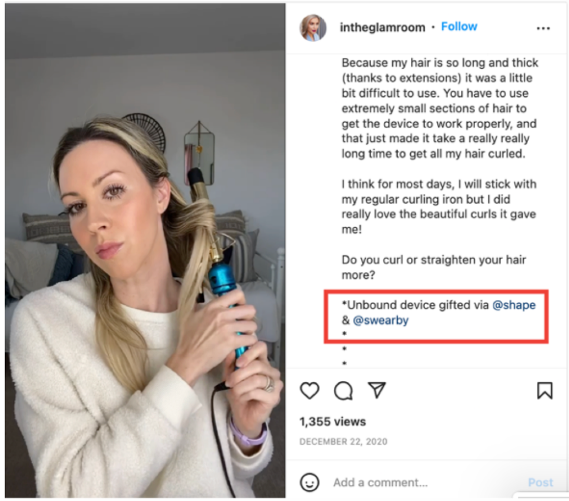
**Figure 16B**
**Content creation brand partnership - example from comedian and influencer Sabrina Brier**



2 370 likes

sab.rina.brier #ad She needs Bread Financial desperately - link in bio! #paid

**Figure 16C**
**Gifting arrangement example – Influencer Ashlee shares a truthful review of a gifted product**



intheglamroom · Follow

Because my hair is so long and thick (thanks to extensions) it was a little bit difficult to use. You have to use extremely small sections of hair to get the device to work properly, and that just made it take a really really long time to get all my hair curled.

I think for most days, I will stick with my regular curling iron but I did really love the beautiful curls it gave me!

Do you curl or straighten your hair more?

*Unbound device gifted via @shape & @swearby
*
*
*

1,355 views

DECEMBER 22, 2020

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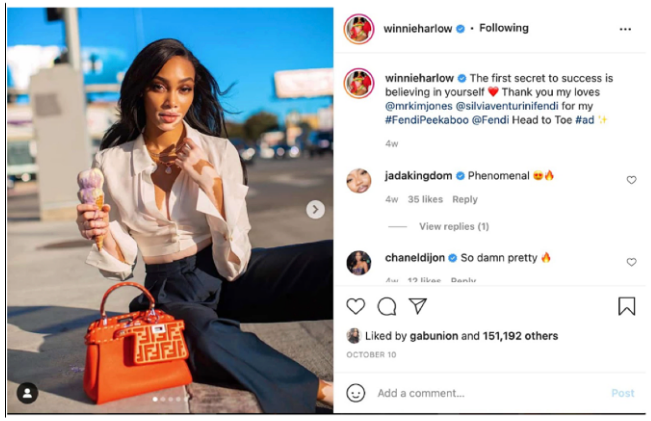
**Figure 16D**
**Ambassador partnership – example of model and influencer Winnie Harlow's and Fendi's partnership**



winnieharlow · Following

winnieharlow The first secret to success is believing in yourself ❤️ Thank you my loves @mrkimjones @silviaventurinifendi for my #FendiPeekaboo @Fendi Head to Toe #ad ✨

4w

jadakingdom Phenomenal 😍🔥
4w 35 likes Reply
View replies (1)

chaneldijon So damn pretty 🔥

Liked by gabunion and 151,192 others

OCTOBER 10

Add a comment... Post

**Figure 16E**
**Ambassador partnership – example of celebrity hairstylist Jen Atkins and Dyson**

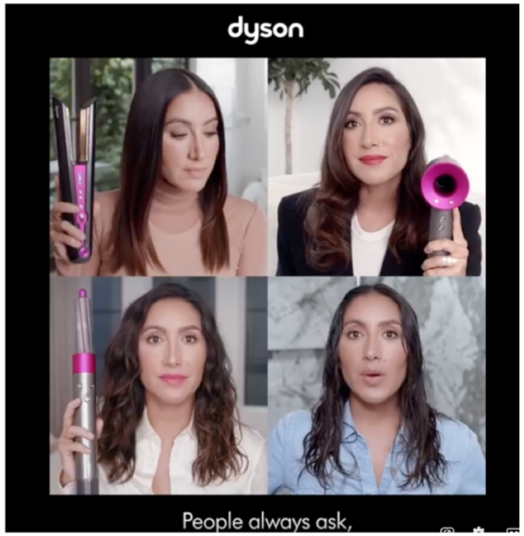
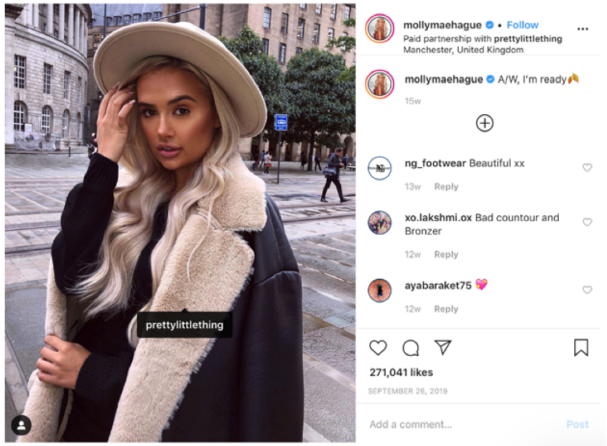


**Figure 16F**
**True co-partnership – example of influencer Molly Mae Hague's and Pretty Little Thing's partnership, where Molly Mae Hague acts as a creative director of the brand**



mollymaehague • Follow
Paid partnership with prettylittlething
Manchester, United Kingdom

mollymaehague A/W, I'm ready🍂
15w

ng_footwear Beautiful xx
13w Reply

xo.lakshmi.ox Bad countour and Bronzer
12w Reply

ayabaraket75 💖
12w Reply

271,041 likes

SEPTEMBER 26, 2019

Add a comment... Post

### *(1) Paid sponsor arrangement*

Paid sponsor arrangements are influencer-brand partnerships that are more contractual in nature. These arrangements usually involve posts where the influencer has been either paid to promote a product or is part of an affiliate program (the influencer receives a percentage of sales). The influencer would explicitly promote and advertise a brand and encourage product trial, sometimes with a link to purchase or a promotional code (Vicuña 2021). Consumers often pay attention to these posts as sources of inspiration, and such posts are an effective way to build brand awareness and encourage trial.

*Tensions related to authenticity.* The influencer who wants to improve or maintain the authenticity of their assemblage may be hindered in doing so by working with a myriad of brands for paid sponsor arrangements. The expressive capacity of such content—often pre-scripted by brands—can tarnish consumers' attitudes of the assemblage's identity, as well as of the content. As suggested by several participants (e.g., BM11), when an influencer works with many different brands, this is usually primarily for short-term financial gain. Nevertheless, a paid sponsor arrangement can still be perceived as authentic by the audience. As BM11 put it, these collaborations can represent aspirational content for the consumers, and thus still be seen as authentic content:

> "We all are sitting, like having a corporate job, and here's this girl… who gets to travel the world, and work with so many brands, so we aspire to be them. …We're just seeing this and we think it's cool…I'm just going to save it." (BM11)

How can brands ensure that this type of branded content is perceived as authentic by consumers? I found that a crucial aspect of producing authentic sponsored content is genuine brand usage linked to the originality property of the assemblage. As IMA3 noted from their own experience as a follower of branded content, what matters is that the influencer likes the brand and would use it in their daily lives:

> "in Sweden, for example, influencers can get a lot of crap from people, because the followers are very picky, and they're like, I know that you don't like this product, and I see that you're working with this brand. So influencers get a bit of hate for that stuff." (IMA3)

One of the participants, CON19, stated that they followed an influencer who was "raving" about a brand they wore, without it being a "#ad". The brand eventually reached out to the influencer and offered a brand partnership. Even though the collaboration was in form of a paid sponsorship, the partnership and the content created was very authentic, because it was a genuine collaboration between the two parties. Similarly, CON18 noted that if the influencer really uses the product, the content becomes more trustworthy: "if they really like it, they show that they have been using it before, then I trust the content produced by the influencer". Thus, when it comes to paid sponsor arrangements, consumers seek branded content that showcases the originality property of the assemblage (see Figure 16A).

### *(2) Content creation brand partnership*

The influencer, as part of this partnership, is given the freedom to exercise more creative control over the branded content or participate in social media takeovers (when the influencer creates content for the brand's social media channel). In such partnerships, influencers are not posting content overly prescribed by the brand, because they endeavor to create content they care and are passionate about, as opposed to the 'hard sell' content a brand may want (Dutton 2003). Consumers perceive such content to be "of value", and they would consider buying the brand because they believe that "positive reinforcement from someone I trust contributes to [buying the brand]" (CON62).

In such partnerships, the creative voice of the influencer takes priority over the brand's claims. Instead of describing the brand or listing its selling points, the influencer employs their capacity to feature the brand in a creative manner through storytelling. Sometimes the influencer may just make a passing reference to the brand, or not at all, by simply keeping it in the frame. For instance, TikTok star and comedian Sabrina Brier, known for her sarcastic tone and funny videos, features brands she promotes in her short reels, using her signature tone and sarcastic humor (Figure 16B). Here brands are seen more as 'guests' of the influencer and are not intrusive to their content. The brand can feature at the heart of the plot's climax as the enabling instrument that leads to a resolution, but does not necessarily perform in its originally intended function. For example, video content by INF3 for Samsung Electronics featured the use of Samsung's connected devices at every pivotal moment of the video. The video featured co-workers during Ramadan, when non-Muslim colleagues try to refrain from eating or drinking in front of their Muslim colleagues, who are fasting. In the climax scene, the video showcased the use of Samsung's robot vacuum cleaner to transport food stealthily between two non-Muslim colleagues using a Samsung mobile app. Consumers recognize the entertainment value of such content and recall the brand benefit even though it is not explicitly described. As CON15 put it:

> "There was a video I saw whereby an influencer was promoting the new iPhone which has IP66 waterproof technology, but he did it in such an interesting way because he didn't just talk about the features but instead did some water sports and dropped the phone into the lake, which caught my attention and made me think about that feature when I want to get my next iPhone."

*Tensions related to authenticity.* Creating this type of content without an explicit opportunity for the brand to sell itself can be uncomfortable for some clients, thereby creating tension in the influencer-brand partnership. Nevertheless, content creation brand partnerships can trigger very high engagement rates amongst followers. INF3 recounted a situation where there was disagreement between the brand and the influencer's creative direction:

> "I was very adamant that we were doing the right thing. I was confident in my content, and I knew my audience would like it, too. I told them that it would hit 100,000 views, but in the end, it hit four million views! I felt vindicated when they came back to me the next year for another campaign." (INF3)

Brands may be concerned about giving up all control over the branded content and worry about being seen solely as some kind of guest, rather than a focal participant in the partnership. In contrast, influencers such as INF3 expect brand managers to trust influencers when it comes to judging their audience, and to accept that success may be measured in different ways rather than just trying to push for a hard sell. At just over $25k, he said his collaboration with Samsung Electronics and the video's viewing performance delivered more return on investment than other ordinary advertising dollars, and the video generated a lot of buzz, and importantly, increased sales of the product.

### *(3) Gifting arrangements*

Within a partnership, sometimes the influencer receives products as gifts, or services as #invites (for instance, an invite to a restaurant for a free meal, or a beauty salon for a free treatment). In such cases, there is no explicit contractual agreement between the parties, and the influencer is not expected to promote the product or the brand they have been gifted. Authentic influencers would only accept such collaborations with brands and products they genuinely use or are interested in:

> "Gifted collaborations, which I think most of them I would decline, I would only accept the ones that either I really like the product, or I think people might like it or it's something cool. But I wouldn't really accept just like… any kind of collaboration." (INF31)

As there is no financial obligation associated with a gifted partnership, consumers trust such partnerships more than paid sponsorships:

> "It's more authentic than a sponsored post because they have an option when it's a gift to not talk about it at all. So they there's like no obligation on them to promote it. So the fact that they've actually said, you know, personally, I have tried it, and I like it is more authentic to me than somebody who has received money and has to say, #sponsored." (CON40)

Even though audiences tend to trust such collaborations more due to the lack of financial obligation between the brand and the influencer, the expressive capacity of the content can still tarnish the influencer assemblage. It is important that the influencer does not risk destabilizing their assemblage's identity, and hence only promotes products in a category where they would be perceived as experts. For instance, if a food influencer is invited for a restaurant trial, that would be perceived as authentic, but if a skincare influencer who does not post food-related content would feature such an invite, the expressive capacity of the content could destabilize the assemblage's identity:

> "They don't need to be an expert, per se. But it needs to be in the general realm of what they do. So if they do like lifestyle content, I would accept like skincare review from them. But if they were all about fast cars, if they suddenly show up, and they're like, Oh, I was gifted this lip gloss, I wouldn't necessarily trust them. So it has to be somewhat linked." (CON40).

*Tensions related to authenticity.* As consumers expect these gifted collaborations to be more genuine than paid sponsor arrangements, a tension inherent in the relationship comes from influencers' expertise. As the product or service is gifted, the influencer is not obliged to share their experience, and the lack of a contractual arrangement in fact allows the influencer to share expert opinion on the brand or product, such as in the case outlined in Figure 16C. Brand managers should understand that the authenticity of such branded content lies in the influencer's expertise, and their ability to share their genuine usage experience.

### *(4) Ambassador partnership*

In an ambassador partnership, the influencer and the brand foster a long-term relationship where the brand becomes part of the influencer's life, and subsequently, the influencer assemblage. The influencer acts as an official ambassador for the brand and is expected to use it and promote it on a regular basis (see Figure 16D, 16E). To ensure that the content created is perceived as authentic by consumers, it is important that "the influencers' opinions are honest and reflect their real beliefs and values" (CON116). As CON39 put it, it is about whether the influencer shares an honest review, even if it is not the "most expensive product promoted".

*Tensions related to authenticity.* The research reveals that transparency can become a key tension linked to authenticity in ambassador partnerships, and specifically whether the influencer can be transparent about any shortcomings of the brand. The brand may not want to weaken the unique selling points of its products, while the influencer may not want to lie to his or her audience. Nevertheless, I found that to create authentic branded content in ambassador partnerships, influencers should share authentic experiences, truthful reviews, and opinions. An example of an authentic brand ambassadorship is the partnership between celebrity hair-stylist Jen Atkin, an ambassador for the Dyson AirWrap, who has been sharing truthful reviews and real usage experiences of the brand since 2018 (Figure 16E).

### *(5) True co-partnership*

Such partnerships often involve product co-creation, and more recently, the influencer even acting as a creative director for the brand (see Figure 16F). The influencer becomes an active part of the brand assemblage (and not just the other way around), wherein both the brand and the influencer can leverage each other's reputation and positive brand associations to "build their own brand" (INF13). As CON18 pointed out, this is a mutually beneficial collaboration for both partners, that is "about brand reputation for both the influencer and the brand". In true co-partnerships, the influencer can go beyond mere financial interest, and co-create something that shows their intrinsic involvement with the brand and their audience, often making important contributions to the influencer's personal brand equity. For instance, Molly-Mae Hague, as a creative director of Pretty Little Thing, works long hours to develop the brand further and does so with honesty and good faith, ultimately enhancing her own brand (McLaren 2022).

*Tensions related to authenticity.* As the influencer becomes a component of the brand's own assemblage, the brand may become overly reliant on the influencer, potentially leaving the brand vulnerable to the influencer:

> "You need to be careful not to rely on a single influencer only for everything, because your brand will be associated with the influencer too much. If something then goes on, happens to the influencer, it can also hurt your brand." (IMA3)

An additional important authenticity tension relates to the integrity of the influencer. As influencers are expected to be intrinsically motivated under these arrangements, they should not try to form true co-partnerships with too many brands. In fact, as CON40 noted, in such cases the influencer may need to be working exclusively with a single brand, otherwise the meaning of a true co-partnership may be threatened:

> "Blair Fowler and Elle Fowler… were doing makeup videos. And they brought out these partnerships all the time. Like they brought out their own lip glosses and they would literally forget them after like a day and stop mentioning them. And these campaigns can ruin an authentic influencers image, because then I don't trust you. Because then I feel like your motivation is the money that you undoubtedly received."

## Table 9: Supporting Quotes for the Branded Content Authenticity Spectrum

| Spectrum | Exemplar quote |
|---|---|
| **(1) Paid sponsor arrangements** | • "Marketing exclusively for money is enough for other forms of media, especially television." (CON62)<br>• "Momentarily cool… they're making some money. But on the long-term basis, they'll find that they actually don't have a brand. They're not a brand, and other, big brands will not want to work with them". (BM11)<br>• "I don't pay much attention to it, it's just nice to look at some of their glamorous pictures sometimes and maybe get some information very quickly. Sometimes I get some inspiration from their fashion or makeup, especially if they are Asian like me." (CON5)<br>• "The audience knows that influencers make a good living by promoting brands online. So, they start to question these promotions. They want more authenticity from the influencer as opposed to sponsored posts." (CON225)<br>• "No. I assume the person is being compensated for promoting it, and prioritizing making money over their fan base" (CON112)<br>• "Definitely not. I'd assume they didn't use the product and that they're simply desperate to make a quick buck." (CON94)<br>• "There is this energy drink brand. It's like if you have more than 50k followers, you become an influencer of this brand. The content is literally all over my Instagram. I don't think this content is very authentic because I don't think every influencer actually drinks this energy drink, these posts look too scripted. However, I know this one influencer who actually uses this drink a lot, in that case, I think those posts are genuine." (CON38)<br>• "I normally go for brands that are already renowned, you know, like Bobby Brown or like Uniqlo… brands with high reputation…. Or if they hold up the values that I have… I can work with brands I am not familiar with, if the brand has good values" (INF13)<br>• "For sponsored posts, I wouldn't necessarily put all the negatives in that sponsored posts. But if someone were to DM me and asked me for information, for my opinion, in private, I would just let them know what I feel about it. And I'm pretty open with that." (INF13) |
| **(2) Content creation brand partnership** | • "We recently filmed content for a property developer over lockdown with the idea that it would look like a 'Modern Family' type script. However, because the client wanted us to cover many of the property's selling points, I felt that the video did not live up to our creative intentions. In the end, the video views and metric performance were only mediocre." (INF8)<br>• We have done content for clients who sometimes just want us to talk all about their product benefits and sell their products, and in the end, we feel the final content does not represent us and who we are. When this happens, we will inform the clients that this video would be better off only featured on their branded media platforms instead of our [YouTube] channel because we know that our audience would not resonate with it and the video will perform poorly." (INF2)<br>• "I like how they show you the lifestyle rather than the product itself. I recall a video where the influencer was just sitting and watching a movie, and he was just having a very funny reaction every time, but in the end, it turns out that he was reacting to the popcorn and not the movie. It was very amusing, and it made me want to go out and buy it." (CON5)<br>• "If they incorporate brand into the videos [they make], rather than just share information on the brand, like an ad, that content performs better" (CON25)<br>• "During the lockdown, our client Starbucks came to us asking if we could create content that showcases how people can achieve café-like coffee at home. I told them that in this environment our audience would not be interested in a video that tells them to stay home and teaches them how to make coffee like in their cafes. Instead, we pitched them a series of Instastories and Reels shot from my perspective at home, documenting my |

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| | experience of making their coffee. The client was initially skeptical because it felt so different from their normal ads, but I told them that it was not an ad. It’s content!” (INF1)<br>- “We had a campaign message about how our brand can make your wish come true, so we challenged influencers to find something that we could make come true. One of the influencers wished of being able to sing, so we partnered with another influencer, who was a singer, and we created content around her to make her wish come true. It was not a product-specific message, but we just wanted content to bring our brand to the shopper’s top of mind as they shop during 11.11.” (CON5)<br>- “There was a video I saw whereby an influencer was promoting the new iPhone which has IP66 waterproof technology, but he did it in such an interesting way because he didn’t just talk about the features but instead did some water sports and dropped the phone into the lake, which caught my attention and made me think about that feature when I want to get my next iPhone.” (CON15)<br>- “The video revolved around this boy who was always in search of the ‘perfect match’ but was oblivious to his best friend who was always in front of him. The video climaxes when he realizes that she is his perfect match too late, so she locks him out of her house when he comes knocking. Using his phone, he starts to send pictures of their memories together to her HP pocket printer and finally wins her back.” (INF3)<br>- “The client wanted to showcase that Samsung has an ecosystem that you can control with your phone. They allowed us to do what we did because it was a creative solution that fell within brand guidelines. If they had insisted that the purpose of the vacuum was not to transport food but to be sucking the dust off floors, then creativity would be lost and our audience would not be interested in it.” (INF3)<br>- “Content that is genuine to that person. That means the information may not be all accurate, but it’s what the influencer believes to be correct” (CON111) |
| **(3) Gifting arrangement** | - “On both micro and large influencers, you need to be smart who to partner with, on the lower level, micro influencers will want to say yes as much as they can. If they have a niche figured out, they will know which products to work with. If you are large, and have a niche figured out, it is much clearer” (CON21)<br>- “It’s similar that people get products on amazon because they have honest review. So working with these influencers can be your all-in-one-stop to show your reviews and share it with a large audience, like a portfolio of reviews” (CON21)<br>- “It’s more authentic than a paid sponsorship based on the fact that they have an option when it's a gift to not talk about it at all. So they there's like no obligation on them to promote it. So the fact that they've actually said, you know, personally, I have tried it, and I like it is more authentic to me than somebody who has received money and has to say, #sponsored.” (CON40) |
| **(4) Ambassador partnership** | - “At the beginning, I just took whatever, I just took whatever brand that wanted to work with me, I was just building my portfolio. But I think as time went by, I had less time for it. So I started filtering out which brands I wanted to work for. And that really made me think about my own brand: what I wanted to portray because, I built my brand for, say five years, I wouldn't want people to call me a sellout. Or like, call me a liar. Because I feel like that [being an influencer] comes with some sort of responsibility, people sort of trust my opinions” (INF13)<br>- “Selena Gomez, she was an ambassador for Coach… you would see all of these photos. I remember back in the day, where like, she was actually using the bags, like in her everyday life, not just like, ‘Oh, here's a post, #coach, #sponsored, #IamAnAmbassadorOfCoach, but like, if you see the person actually using it, and not just being like, here's my video, okay, I'm done. I'm now gonna throw this Coach bag out the window, because it's not Chanel.” (CON40)<br>- “I used to punish products that I do not like and give them terrible reviews, but eventually I realized that sometimes people do have different tastes, and even if I do not like it, my viewers might not agree! Therefore, I learned to be more diplomatic in my dissent. Instead of saying that a |

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| | mascara is useless because it is not dark enough, I will say it gives a very light cover which is not right for my style, but people who like a lighter look might prefer this.” (INF11) |
| **(5)<br>True co-partnership** | • “She doesn’t just take everything for the money. She receives a partnership, she declines it, and shares the reason with the audience. Authenticity is not accepting all the brand deals that you get. Otherwise, it is clear that you just do it for the money.” (CON18)<br>• “Provide insight into their personal lives and interact with their followers. Responding to messages, giving their opinions on products, and their accessibility set them apart from their celebrity counterparts....” (CON80)<br>• “The genuine connection your influencer partners have with their audiences will be passed onto you [brand].” (CON204)<br>• “If [we work with] a brand that's very established, then they have to put more work into finding the right influencer. If it's someone [brand] that doesn't really have a strong, set position within the market in terms of branding, they have a wider pool of influencers to choose, because then they can look at good personality, what they're posting, if it’s aesthetically pleasing, does it work with our brand, and so on. While if it's the brand [highly authentic] has very set guidelines, then it [the selection process] becomes much more narrow, because then they not only look at the person, but make sure that the person very much fit their standards, too.” (IMA3) |

## Theoretical and Managerial Implications

In this chapter, I investigate how different properties of the influencer assemblage impact the influencer-brand partnership, and consequently, the authenticity of the branded content created. Several important implications emanate for both theory and practice.

### *Theoretical Implications*

*Research on authenticity.* The current chapter contributes to the literature on authenticity. Whereas prior research has focused on defining influencer authenticity from the perspective of a single stakeholder (Audrezet, de Kerviler and Moulard 2020; Lee and Eastin 2021; Lindmoser, Weitzl and Zniva 2022), I examine influencer authenticity from the perspective of all key stakeholders involved. Notably, whereas prior research defined how consumers or influencers perceive authenticity, I found that when examined holistically, perceived influencer authenticity is a broader concept that considers the role authenticity plays in influencers' relationship with brand managers, influencer marketing agencies, and consumers. More specifically, I assert that transparency encompasses more than just disclosing contractual terms, and involves sharing both the positive and negative aspects of the product and the influencer's life, while remaining true to oneself (Audrezet, de Kerviler and Moulard 2020; Lee and Eastin 2021). I introduce honesty and shared values as integral components of influencer integrity, expanding the traditional notion of intrinsic motivation (e.g., Audrezet, de Kerviler and Moulard 2020). I introduce engagement, a novel property of authenticity for brands and influencers, and highlight the importance of influence over followers as a property of authenticity. I redefine originality as the influencers' personal storytelling and sharing of unique experiences, and suggest that an influencer can imitate or copy content, but it is their personal storytelling style that makes them original (e.g., Lee and Eastin 2021). I also acknowledge that being an expert is not necessary for authenticity but consistently posting on a topic is crucial (Audrezet, de Kerviler and Moulard 2020; Lee and Eastin 202; Nunes et al. 2021).

Through this analysis, I uncover various tensions within influencer-brand partnerships that arise from different aspects of influencer authenticity. One significant tension revolves around influencers' originality, which followers and influencers consider a vital property of authenticity, whereas brand managers and influencer marketing agencies do not view as a defining factor of authenticity. Second, I highlight a tension between influencers and brand managers regarding engagement. Influencers perceive engagement as a means to an end, while brands consider it a crucial aspect of influencer authenticity. Third, although all stakeholders recognize the importance of shared values in establishing authenticity, only consumers expect influencers to demonstrate intrinsic motivation. Fourth, I find that consumers consider transparency essential for authenticity, whereas influencers struggle with expressing their honest opinions. Lastly, while influencers believe their expertise contributes to their authenticity, brand managers often disregard expertise and prioritize engagement. These findings enrich our understanding of the construct of authenticity in general, by showing that different stakeholders can have different perceptions on what makes an entity truly authentic, and thereby, authenticity as a construct should be measured through the lens of all key stakeholders involved.

*Tensions inherent in the influencer-brand collaboration.* Prior work has examined how influencers and brands can work together to promote products and services on social media (Haenlein et al. 2020; Ibáñez-Sánchez et al. 2022), advertise branded content (Rundin and Colliander 2021), drive consumer trust and purchase decisions (Martínez- López et al. 2020b), build brand engagement (Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks 2019), elicit positive follower responses (e.g., Martínez-López et al. 2020a), and foster engagement with sponsored content (e.g., Leung et al. 2022; Wies, Bleier and Edeling 2022). Because influencers' authenticity impacts the effectiveness of the influencer-brand collaboration (e.g., Audrezet, de Kerviler and Moulard 2020; Forbes 2022; HypeAuditor 2023), ignoring the tensions of the influencer-brand relationship limits our understanding of the key drivers of authentic branded content. Thus, in this chapter I examine the tensions inherent in the influencer-brand relationship, by looking at how different stakeholders navigate the organizational ties in an influencer assemblage. Whereas some work in marketing has considered how influencers navigate the tensions created by brands' encroachment on their content (Audrezet, de Kerviler and Moulard 2020; Gerdeman 2019), the focus of this research is on how different stakeholders perceive said tension, especially when it can impact the authenticity of branded content. More specifically, I look at a range of influencer-brand partnerships and highlight which properties of influencer authenticity are pivotal for the creation of authentic branded content within a certain partnership. The findings develop new knowledge about what constitutes authentic branded content. Critically, the authenticity of branded content emanates from different properties of authenticity, and I note that not every property of authenticity must be present for an authentic influencer-brand relationship.

### ***Managerial Implications***

For practitioners, the conceptual framework points to ways in which managers can overcome some of the tensions inherent in the influencer-brand relationship. A prominent tension in the relationship relates to the creative freedom of the influencer. I find that consumers are increasingly vary of pre-scripted content and value genuine usage situations over hard-sell brand messaging. Furthermore, a fruitful influencer-brand relationship encompasses the influencer's ability to create content in their own unique style. Therefore, brand managers may need to trust influencers when it comes to judging their audience and let the influencer create branded content that is in line with the audience's expectation, as well as with the influencer's unique style. This research also sheds light on the different properties of influencer authenticity being important for different stakeholders. For instance, I find that brand managers, first and foremost, define an authentic influencer as one with high engagement metrics. Nevertheless, brand managers need to look beyond engagement, and appreciate the importance of integrity, transparency, and originality when it comes to choosing influencers for their partnerships. As consumers define an authentic influencer as someone who has the consumers' best interest at heart, genuinely uses the brands they partner with, and shares the positives and negatives of the partnership, brand managers should consider the above factors when choosing influencers. More specifically, by understanding that the branded content's authenticity is contingent on the authenticity of the influencer, I encourage managers to look beyond engagement metrics when selecting influencers, and to not shy away from truthful reviews.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that influencer marketing agencies have a more profound understanding of the key properties of authenticity that are important for customers than brand managers. For instance, influencer marketing agencies understand the importance of expertise, transparency, and integrity in driving perceptions of authenticity, apart from engagement metrics frequently prioritized by brand managers. Therefore, brand managers should rely more heavily on influencer marketing agencies when selecting an influencer.

The research also strives to contribute to the rising managerial discussion on the 'authenticity crisis'. More specifically, the findings can help influencers understand what shapes their perceived authenticity amongst their followers. Evidence suggests that 49% of influencers are seen as inauthentic (HypeAuditor 2023), while recent years have seen a rise in the 'unfluencers', who work with every brand that approaches them, and thus contribute significantly to the authenticity crisis (Meltzer 2019). Thus, there is a need for influencers to understand what exactly drives consumers' perceptions of their authenticity. I found that an important aspect of influencer authenticity from the viewpoint of consumers is influencers' integrity, originality, and transparency. Influencers who strive to increase their perceived authenticity should therefore act intrinsically and with consumers' best interest at heart, share stories and personal experiences, and show the truthful aspects of their lives.

## Limitations and Future Research

This chapter has several limitations, leading to new avenues for future research. First, the definition of influencer authenticity was derived from 'bottom up' qualitative input from consumers, influencers, brand managers and influencer marketing agencies. I did this by listening to how different stakeholders define influencers' authenticity, as well as the authenticity of the branded content created. However, the definition can be further quantitatively validated by introducing a questionnaire to measure each property of authenticity. Second, with the rise of the metaverse, extending this research to the domain of virtual influencers and avatars could prove fruitful. Luxury brands, such as Dior, Prada, and Calvin Klein, have worked with Lil Miquela, a virtual robot model with millions of followers. Barbie, Lu do Magal, or Guggimon are just a few other prominent virtual influencers out of the 150 currently posting on social media (Virtual Humans 2023). These virtual influencers frequently engage in brand partnerships, leave brand reviews and testimonials, produce unpacking videos and trial beauty products. In fact, March 2022 has seen the first Metaverse Fashion Week, attended by virtual influencers and famous luxury brands (Peters 2023). I believe virtual influencers could portray elements of authenticity, as long as they are transparent about their virtual nature. Nevertheless, the element of real consumption and expertise may be missing from the construct of authenticity when it comes to virtual influencers. Therefore, future research could explore whether the authenticity of virtual influencers is rooted in the same properties as introduced above. Future work could also examine the tensions inherent in the virtual influencer-brand partnerships, and whether the authenticity of branded content is contingent on the same properties of authenticity as presented here.

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# APPENDIX A: Why So Toxic? A Framework For Exploring Customer Toxicity

## Table A1

### Definition and extant literature summarizing different toxic behaviors

| Toxic behavior | Definition and extant literature |
|---|---|
| Negative word-of-mouth | • "Telling others about the unsatisfactory product ore retailer" (Richins 1983: 68)<br>• Occurs when customers are dissatisfied with a firm and are not encouraged to voice their disapproval directly to it (for example because the company has not invested in customer participation initiatives; Eisingerich, Auh & Merlo 2014)<br>• Can be shared offline, with friends and strangers, and online in the form of electronic NWOM (Dubois, Bonezzi & De Angelis 2016)<br>• Can influence other customers' switching intentions (Ruiz-Mafe et al. 2016)<br>• Discourages others from engaging in purchase (East, Hammond & Lomax 2008) and shapes their perceptions of a company (Relling et al. 2016) |
| Exaggerated NWOM | • "Intentionally distorted communications by customers that misrepresent their consumption experiences" (Harris, Fisk & Sysalova 2016: 65)<br>• Leads to negative attitude creation amongst customers, and negative brand equity (Harris, Fisk & Sysalova 2016) |
| Online firestorm | • "A sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing NWOM and complaint behavior against a person, company, or group in social media networks" (Pfeffer et al., 2014: 118; Berger & Milkman, 2012; Heath, Bell & Sternberg 2001)<br>• Also called "collaborative brand attacks" (Rauschnabel, Kammerlander & Ivens 2016), "shitstorms" (Einwiller et al. 2016), and "moral panics" (Johnen, Jungblut & Ziegele 2017) |
| Brand avoidance | • "The incidents in which consumers deliberately choose to reject a brand" (Lee, Motion & Conroy 2009:17)<br>• Experiential, identity and moral brand avoidance (McCullough et al. 1998; Bechwati & Morrin 2003; Grégoire & Fisher 2008; Fetscherin & Sampedro 2019)<br>• Boycotters encourage others to refrain buying from a certain firm, while brand avoiders leave the firm quietly (Klein et al. 2004) |
| Boycotting | • "An attempt by one or more parties to achieve certain objectives by urging individual consumers to refrain from making selected purchases in the marketplace." (Friedman 1985:97)<br>• Customers can punish a firm simply by not buying it (Klein et al. 2004), especially when the firm has committed unethical acts of an environmental, political, ethical, or social nature (Yuksel & Mryteza 2009; Hoffman 2011; Chatzidakis & Lee 2013; Yuksel 2013)<br>• Leading causes of customer boycotts, commonly motivated by instrumental motives, include human rights issues, business strategy decisions or corporate failures (Makarem & Jae 2015)<br>• "Expressive boycotts", defined as "vague statements of goals" (Friedman 1999: 153) occur when customers boycott a firm to vent their frustration, or as means of self-expression and self-realization (Kozinets & Handelman 1998; Yuksel 2013). |
| Anti-brand activism | • "Develops around individuals' disapproval of brands, which… have the potential to symbolize negative perceptions associated with corporations" (Romani et al. 2015: 659)<br>• Brand-haters autonomously construct their own interpretation of brand meaning by attacking firm-generated brand messages on social media (Thompson et al. 2006; Kucuk 2008; Krishnamurthy & Kucuk 2009; Kucuk 2010; Petty 2012) |

| | |
|---|---|
| | • Includes brand dilution, when customers mimic the brand's unique associations to ridicule the brand (Kucuk 2016), boycotting behavior, online activism, and forms of active resistance (Romani et al. 2013)<br>• Arise when the company exhibits an opportunistic behavior, or when the brand's values are not in congruence with customers' values (Japutra et al. 2014) |
| Trash-talking | • "The action of offending one's competitor verbally" (Simons 2003; in Japutra et al. 2014: 4)<br>• The customer defends a firm they are attached to by verbally offending a competing firm (Simons 2003; Japutra et al. 2014; Marticotte et al. 2016) |
| Brand sabotage | • "Deliberate behavior by customers or noncustomers who have the dominant objective of causing harm to a brand through the impairment of the brand-related associations of other consumers" (Kähr et al. 2016: 26)<br>• Can harm the brand image, brand equity, brand associations and even discourage other customers from buying the firm (Kähr et al. 2016).<br>• Brand saboteurs use new technologies and social media tools to wreak havoc and attack companies (Kähr et al. 2016).<br>• The negative effect of brand sabotage can also spill over to retailer firms, hence bringing about unprecedented negative consequences on multiple companies (Nyffenegger et al. 2018) |

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## Table A2

## Emotions behind engaging in toxic behaviors

| Toxic behaviors | Emotions |
|---|---|
| Boycott | • Disgust (Makarem & Jae 2015)<br>• Outrage (Lindenmeier, Schleer & Pricl 2012) |
| NWOM | • Anger (Romani et al. 2013; Rucker & Petty 2004; Gelbrich 2010; Bougie et al. 2003)<br>• Hate (Romani et al. 2013; Alba & Lutz 2013; Zarantonello et al. 2016; Hegner, Fetscherin, & Van Delzen 2017)<br>• Embarrassment (Wu 2010)<br>• Frustration (Stephens & Gwinner 1998; Gelbrich 2010; Grégoire & Fisher 2008)<br>• Helplessness (Gelbrich 2010). |
| Exaggerated NWOM | • Anger (Romani et al. 2013)<br>• Fear, Frustration (Yoo 2009; Harris, Fisk & Sysalova 2016)<br>• Dissatisfaction (Harris, Fisk & Sysalova 2016) |
| Online firestorms | • Anger (Romani et al. 2013; Rucker & Petty 2004; Gelbrich 2010; Bougie et al. 2003)<br>• Hate (Romani et al. 2013; Alba & Lutz 2013; Zarantonello et al. 2016; Hegner, Fetscherin, & Van Delzen 2017)<br>• Embarrassment (Wu 2010) |
| Sabotage | • Anger, Frustration, Outrage, Hatred (Kähr et al. 2016) |
| Trash-talking | • Insult to personal identity (Colliander & Hauge-Wien 2013; Muniz & Hamer 2001; Hickman & Ward 2007) |
| Anti-brand communities | • Hate (Johnson et al. 2011)<br>• Disgust (Alba & Lutz 2013) |
| Brand switching | • Hate (Romani et al. 2013) |
| Brand avoidance | • Hate (Grégoire et al. 2009; Hegner, Fetscherin, & Van Delzen 2017) |
| Desire for revenge | • Hate (Grégoire et al. 2009) |
| Retaliation | • Hate (Hegner, Fetscherin, & Van Delzen 2017) |

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## Table A3

## Motives behind engaging in toxic behavior

| Toxic behaviors | Motives | Constructive or destructive motives |
|---|---|---|
| Boycott | - Instrumental motives (Friedman 1999; John & Klein 2003; Klein et al. 2004; Yuksel 2013)<br>- Non-instrumental motives: expressive motivation to vent frustration (Friedman 1999); self-expression, self-realization; self-enhancement (Kozinets & Handelman 1998; Yuksel 2013; Klein et al. 2014) | Constructive |
| NWOM | - Social motivation to communicate their negative feedback to fellow customers (East, Hammond & Lomax 2008; Relling et al. 2016; Ruiz-Mafe et al. 2016)<br>- To exert constructive punitive action (Romani et al. 2013)<br>- To vent negative feelings, concern for others, socially benefited economic incentives, helping the company, advice seeking, platform assistance and positive self-enhancement (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004) | Constructive |
| Exaggerated NWOM | - To vent off negative feelings (Berger 2014; Harris et al. 2016)<br>- To gain personal benefit through harming the firm (Romani et al. 2013; Berger 2014; Baker & Kim 2019)<br>- To initiate change from within the organization (Romani et al. 2013; Baker & Kim 2019)<br>- To warn others (Berger 2014)<br>- To gain others' attention (Romani et al. 2013; Baker & Kim 2019) | Constructive |
| Online firestorms | - To gain social recognition (Johnen, Jungblut & Zeigele 2017) | Constructive |
| Sabotage | - To harm the firm (Kähr et al. 2016) | Destructive |
| Trash-talking | - To defend one's social identity (Muniz & Hamer 2001)<br>- To positively differentiate the preferred firm from the rival (Hickman &Ward 2007; Japutra et al. 2014) | Destructive |
| Anti-brand communities | - To stand up against the 'unethical' corporations (Hollenbeck & Zinkham 2006) | Destructive |

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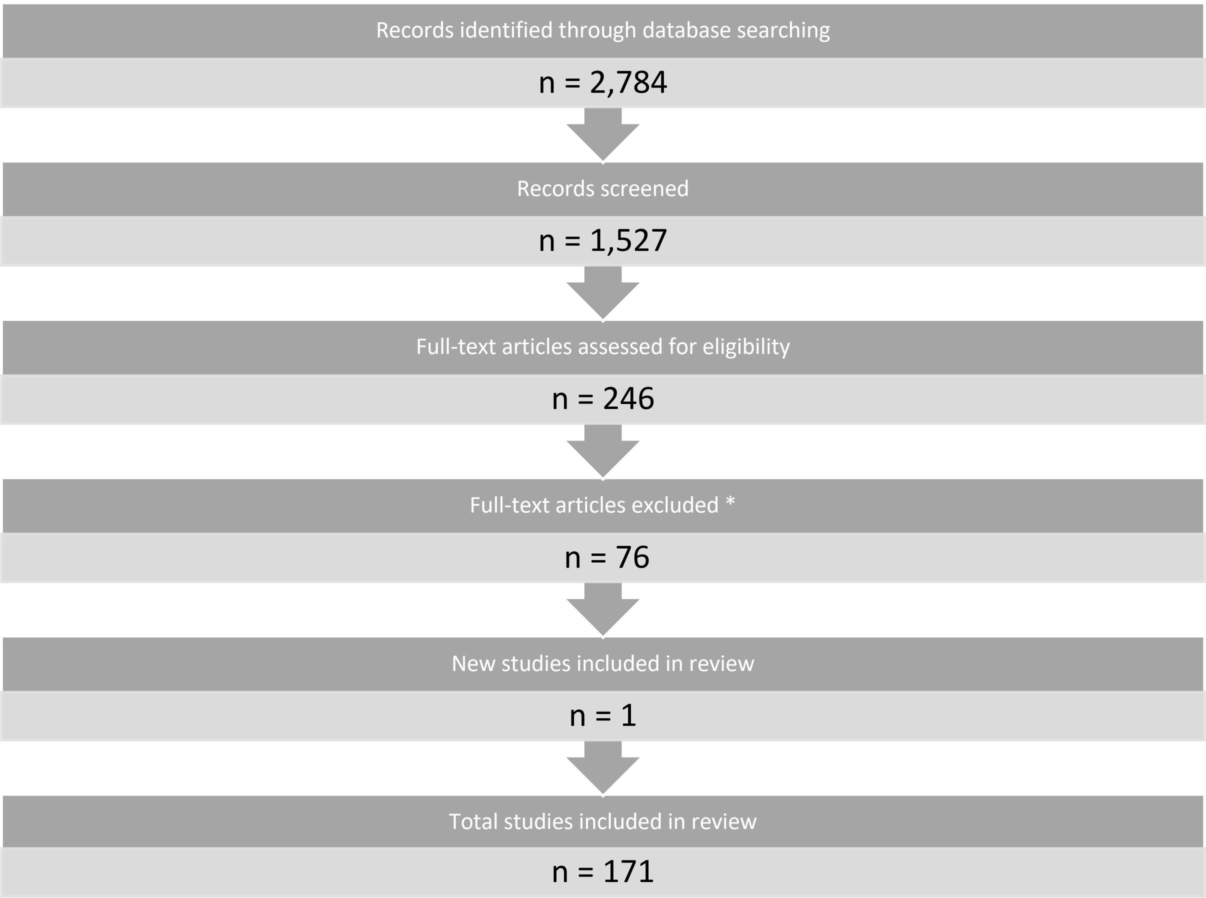
## Table A4
## PRISMA method

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Platforms & databases used | JSTOR, ELSEVIER Scopus, Google Scholar, EBSCOHost, SAGE Premier Journals | |
| Search strings | Different types of customer behavior | negative word-of-mouth, negative WOM, NWOM, WOM, boycott, brand boycott, brand sabotage, sabotage, illegitimate complaint, exaggerated negative word-of-mouth, exaggerated NWOM, online firestorm, trash-talking, anti-brand activism, brand avoidance, non-complaint |
| | Customer behavior | customer misbehavior, jaycustomer behavior, dysfunctional customer behavior, retaliatory behavior, deviant customer behavior, aberrant customer behavior, problem customer, destructive punitive action, destructive customer behavior, constructive punitive action, constructive customer behavior, hostile aggression, instrumental aggression |
| | Conceptual domains | Transgression, rumination, service failure, brand transgression, justice violation, service recovery |
| Inclusion criteria | I look at the drivers, antecedents, motivators, consequences, and the emotions & cognitions linked to negative customer behavior (including constructive and destructive behaviors). I exclude articles that look at the (1) drivers of positive behavior -e.g., positive WOM, exaggerated positive WOM, brand-activism that is positive, etc., (2) negative behavior not driven by service failure and brand transgression. | |

## Figure A1

## Studies selection process

Figure W1 shows the selection process of previous research papers based on the PRISMA guidelines. My search of the literature resulted in 2,784 potentially relevant articles. Duplicates were removed, and abstracts from the remaining 1,527 publications were screened. Initially, articles with limited focus on negative customer behaviors were excluded (e.g., articles that looked at negative customer relationship arising from product-harm crises, articles that looked at positive customer behavior only, articles that looked at negative customer emotions not connected to service failures or brand transgressions, articles that looked at corporate betrayal and political attitudes; N= 1,281). The remaining 246 articles were selected for further screening based on the inclusion scheme identified in Table A4. After removing potential duplicates and assessing each article based on the inclusion criteria above, 171 articles were used to answer the research questions of this systematic review.


Records identified through database searching
n = 2,784
Records screened
n = 1,527
Full-text articles assessed for eligibility
n = 246
Full-text articles excluded *
n = 76
New studies included in review
n = 1
Total studies included in review
n = 171

* I excluded records that look at toxic behaviors linked to customer fraud, industrial buyer-seller relationships, unsustainable luxury information, dispreferred markets, or positive customer-firm relationships

# APPENDIX B: Examining the Role of the Deflation Effect: How to Reduce the Vengefulness of Negative Reviews

## Section BA: Pilot Study and Pre-tests

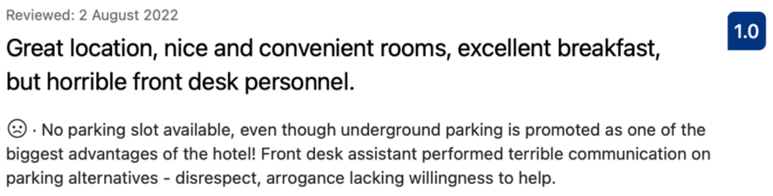
### *Section BA1: Vengeful consumer reviews*

The purpose of the pilot study is to examine whether vengeful reviews are more harmful to companies than less vengeful reviews. One hundred thirty-four Prolific participants were recruited in this study, pre-registered at Aspredicted.com (#133704; https://aspredicted.org/LPG_V1M). Participants were aged between 18-34 (9%), 25-34 (31.3%), 35-44 (26.1%), 45-54 (16.5%), 55-64 (11.9%), and 65-74 (5.2%); 65.70% female, 33.60% male and .70% preferred not to state).

Participants were presented with the 4 negative reviews below with the lowest rating of 1-star (Review 1 and Review 3 accessed through Booking.com, and Review 2 and 4 accessed through TripAdvisor) of a European hotel. Participants were then asked to indicate their intention to stay in the hotel, the perceived helpfulness, and the perceived negativity of the review on a 7-point Likert scale (1 – "not at all", 7 – "very much so").

One-sample t-test revealed that participants were not likely to stay at the hotel based on the negative reviews ($M_{\text{booking.com}} = 3.36$ vs. $M_{\text{tripadvisor}} = 2.09$, $t_{\text{booking.com}} = 35.51$, $t_{\text{tripadvisor}} = 24.59$, $p < .001$), and found the reviews on Tripadvisor more negative than the reviews on Booking.com ($M_{\text{booking.com}} = 4.84$ vs. $M_{\text{tripadvisor}} = 6.14$, $t_{\text{booking.com}} = 58.43$, $t_{\text{tripadvisor}} = 68.71$, $p < .001$). Participants found the vengeful reviews to be helpful in guiding their purchase decisions ($M_{\text{booking.com}} = 4.71$ vs. $M_{\text{tripadvisor}} = 4.61$, $t_{\text{booking.com}} = 51.30$, $t_{\text{tripadvisor}} = 36.81$, $p < .001$). Therefore, the pilot study sheds light on the importance of addressing vengeful reviews. More specifically, vengeful reviews decrease individuals' intention to purchase, and are deemed helpful in guiding purchase decisions. Thus, I find initial evidence of why reducing the vengefulness of written reviews is important.

### Review 1



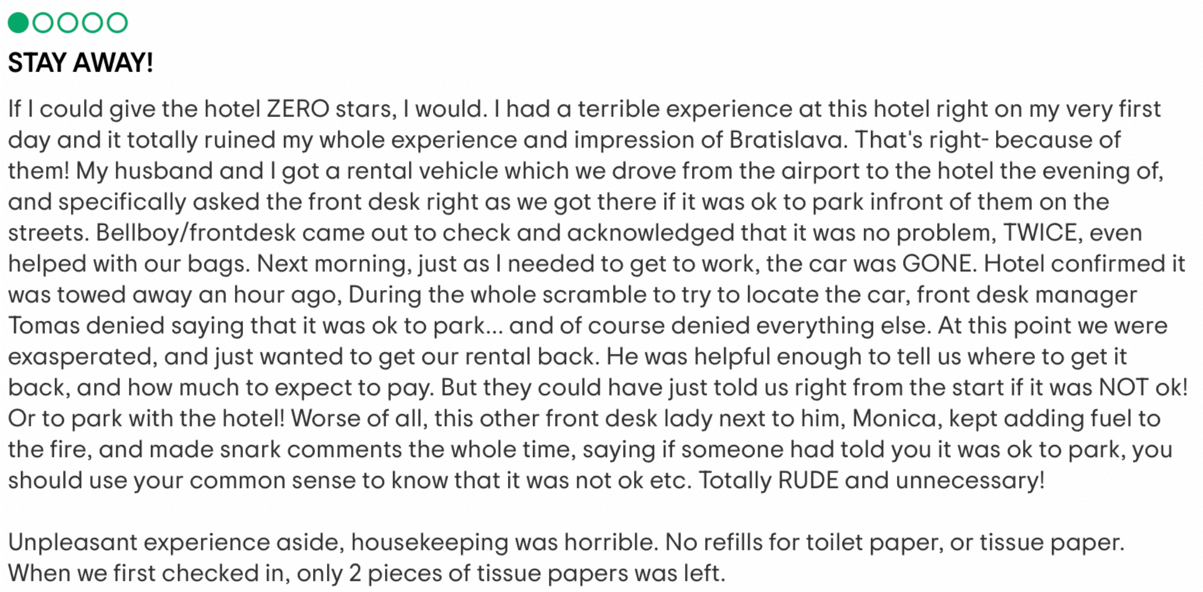
Reviewed: 2 August 2022

**Great location, nice and convenient rooms, excellent breakfast, but horrible front desk personnel.**

1.0

☹ · No parking slot available, even though underground parking is promoted as one of the biggest advantages of the hotel! Front desk assistant performed terrible communication on parking alternatives - disrespect, arrogance lacking willingness to help.

### Review 2



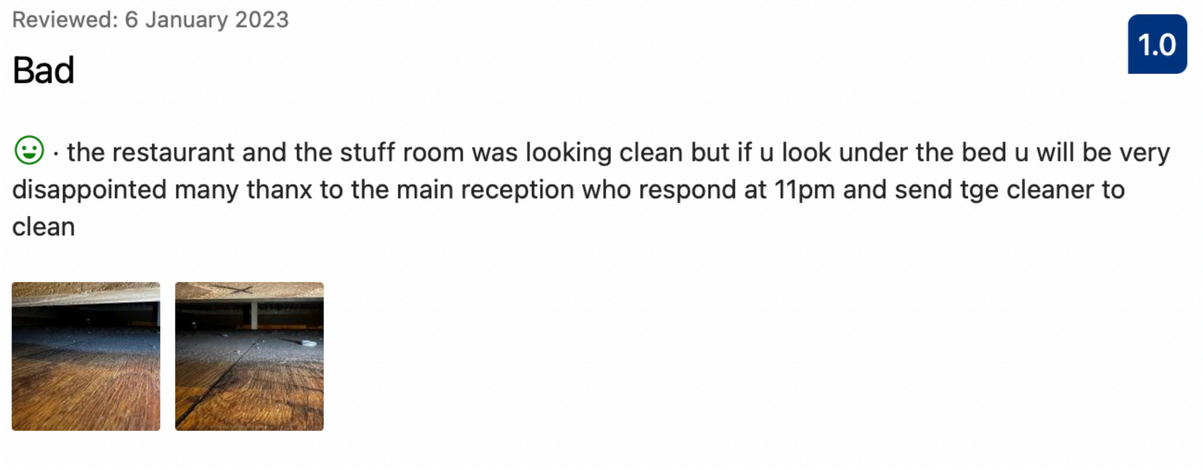
●○○○○

**STAY AWAY!**

If I could give the hotel ZERO stars, I would. I had a terrible experience at this hotel right on my very first day and it totally ruined my whole experience and impression of Bratislava. That's right- because of them! My husband and I got a rental vehicle which we drove from the airport to the hotel the evening of, and specifically asked the front desk right as we got there if it was ok to park infront of them on the streets. Bellboy/frontdesk came out to check and acknowledged that it was no problem, TWICE, even helped with our bags. Next morning, just as I needed to get to work, the car was GONE. Hotel confirmed it was towed away an hour ago, During the whole scramble to try to locate the car, front desk manager Tomas denied saying that it was ok to park... and of course denied everything else. At this point we were exasperated, and just wanted to get our rental back. He was helpful enough to tell us where to get it back, and how much to expect to pay. But they could have just told us right from the start if it was NOT ok! Or to park with the hotel! Worse of all, this other front desk lady next to him, Monica, kept adding fuel to the fire, and made snark comments the whole time, saying if someone had told you it was ok to park, you should use your common sense to know that it was not ok etc. Totally RUDE and unnecessary!

Unpleasant experience aside, housekeeping was horrible. No refills for toilet paper, or tissue paper. When we first checked in, only 2 pieces of tissue papers was left.

### Review 3



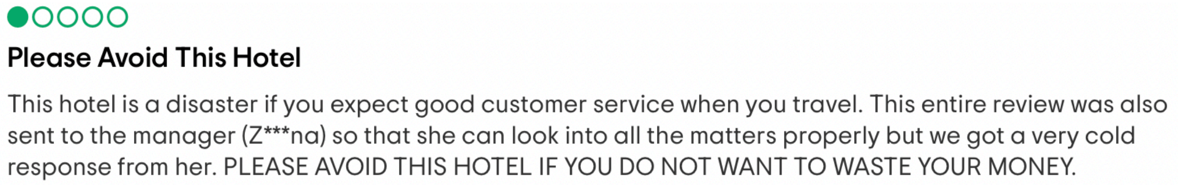
Reviewed: 6 January 2023

**Bad**

1.0

☺ · the restaurant and the stuff room was looking clean but if u look under the bed u will be very disappointed many thanx to the main reception who respond at 11pm and send tge cleaner to clean

### Review 4



●○○○○

**Please Avoid This Hotel**

This hotel is a disaster if you expect good customer service when you travel. This entire review was also sent to the manager (Z***na) so that she can look into all the matters properly but we got a very cold response from her. PLEASE AVOID THIS HOTEL IF YOU DO NOT WANT TO WASTE YOUR MONEY.

### *Section BA2: Study 6 severity condition pretest*

The severity conditions were pretested with 420 MTurk participants. 22 participants failed the attention check, leaving 398 total participants (53% female, 46.20% male, .80% preferred not to disclose). Participants were aged between 18-24 (2.8%), 25-34 (59.5%), 35-44 (26.1%), 45-54 (6.8%), 55-64 (4.3%) and 65-74 (.5%). Participants rated the severity of their experience with the at-home massage app ( “On a scale of 1 to 7, how positive or negative would you rate your experience with the at-home massage app?”; 1 = “very positive”, 4 = “neither positive nor negative”, 7 = “very negative”) and the severity of the service failure (“On a scale of 1 to 7, how severe would you rate the above service failure”; 1 = “not at all”, 4 = “moderately”, 7 = “very severe”). Participants rated the severe service failure as more negative ($M_{\text{severe}} = 2.66$, $SD = 1.32$ vs. $M_{\text{lowseverity}} = 2.49$, $SD = 1.08$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 2.25$, $SD = 1.06$ vs. $M_{\text{positive}} = 2.17$, $SD = 1.08$), $F(3, 394) = 3.902$, $p < .01$), as well as more severe ($M_{\text{severe}} = 4.48$, $SD = 1.50$ vs. $M_{\text{lowseverity}} = 4.14$, $SD = 1.49$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 3.92$, $SD = 1.74$ vs. $M_{\text{positive}} = 3.90$, $SD = 1.75$), $F(3, 394) = 2.778$, $p = .041$), validating the manipulation.

## Section BB: Study means and measurements

### *Table BB1*
### *Study 1 measurement items and reliabilities*

| Items *(1= not at all; strongly disagree,5/7= very much; strongly agree)* | Reliabilities | Mean | SD | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Rumination** | *r* = .91 | 3.37 | 1.09 | 1 | 5 |
| I can't stop thinking about how I was wronged by this company | | 3.42 | 1.15 | 1 | 5 |
| Memories about this company's wrongful actions have limited my enjoyment of life | | 3.50 | 1.13 | 1 | 5 |
| I have a hard time getting thoughts of how I was mistreated out of my head | | 3.42 | 1.20 | 1 | 5 |
| I try to figure out the reasons why this company hurt me | | 3.49 | 1.17 | 1 | 5 |
| The wrong I suffered is never far from my mind | | 3.55 | 1.11 | 1 | 5 |
| I find myself replaying the events over and over in my mind | | | | | |
| **Vengeful behavior** | *r* = .89 | | | | |
| I want to take actions to get the firm in trouble | | 3.41 | 1.13 | 1 | 5 |
| I want to punish the firm in some way | | 3.42 | 1.22 | 1 | 5 |
| I want to cause inconvenience to the firm | | 3.28 | 1.15 | 1 | 5 |
| I want to get even with the firm | | 3.50 | 1.18 | 1 | 5 |
| I want to make the firm get what it deserves | | 3.51 | 1.09 | 1 | 5 |
| **Manipulation check** | | | | | |
| On a scale of 1 – 7, how severe would you describe the company's service failure presented to you? | | 4.76 | 1.54 | 1 | 7 |
| **Controls** | | | | | |
| On a scale of 1 – 7, how likely are you to order groceries from online delivery providers? (1 = not at all; 7= very likely) | | 4.86 | 1.37 | 1 | 7 |
| How often do you order from online food delivery providers? (1 = never; 2 = once a year; 3 = once every few months; 4 = every month; 5 = every week; 6 = every few days; 7 = every day) | | | | | |
| | | 4.79 | 1.18 | 1 | 7 |
| **Gender** (1 = male, 2 = female, 3 = non-binary/ third gender, 4 = prefer not to say) | | 1.53 | .58 | 1 | 4 |
| **Age** (1= 18-24; 2 = 25-34; 3 = 35-44; 4 = 45-54; 5 = 55-64; 6 = 65-74; 7 = 75+) | | 2.87 | .95 | 1 | 7 |

### *Table BB2*
### *Study 1 means*

| | **Goal Attainment Failure Severity** | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| (N = 271) | *Control*<br>*(N = 93)* | *Low Severity*<br>*(N = 80)* | *High Severity*<br>*(N = 98)* |
| **Manipulation check - severity** | $4.24^{***}$ | $4.86^{***}$ | 5.16*** |
| **Mediator - rumination** | $3.07^{***}$ | $3.58^{***}$ | $3.72^{***}$ |
| **DV** | | | |
| Vengeful behavior | $3.01^{***}$ | $3.58^{***}$ | $3.72^{***}$ |
| **Controls** | | | |
| Order likelihood | $5.09^{n.s.}$ | $4.81^{n.s.}$ | $4.69^{n.s.}$ |
| Order frequency | $4.87^{n.s.}$ | $4.80^{n.s.}$ | $4.70^{n.s.}$ |
| Age (1 = 18-24; 2 = 25-34; 3 = 35-44; 4 = 45-54; 5 = 55-64; 6 = 65-74; 7 =75+) | $2.92^{n.s.}$ | $2.89^{n.s.}$ | $2.82^{n.s.}$ |
| Gender (1 = male, 2 = female, 3=non-binary/third gender; 4= prefer not to say) | $1.49^{n.s.}$ | $1.51^{n.s.}$ | $1.58^{n.s.}$ |

***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$.

***Table BB3***
***Study 2 measurement items and reliabilities***

| Items *(1= not at all; strongly disagree, 5/7= very much; strongly agree)* | Reliabilities | Mean | SD | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Rumination** | *r* = .84 | 3.53 | .90 | 1 | 5 |
| I can't stop thinking about how I was wronged by this company | | 3.67 | 1.01 | 1 | 5 |
| Memories about this company's wrongful actions have limited my enjoyment of life | | 3.56 | .94 | 1 | 5 |
| I have a hard time getting thoughts of how I was mistreated out of my head | | 3.64 | 1.02 | 1 | 5 |
| I try to figure out the reasons why this company hurt me | | 3.55 | .98 | 1 | 5 |
| The wrong I suffered is never far from my mind | | 3.73 | .98 | 1 | 5 |
| I find myself replaying the events over and over in my mind | | | | | |
| **Vengeful behavior** | *r* = .77 | | | | |
| I want to take actions to get the firm in trouble | | 3.66 | .83 | 1 | 5 |
| I want to punish the firm in some way | | 3.62 | .98 | 1 | 5 |
| I want to cause inconvenience to the firm | | 3.65 | .94 | 1 | 5 |
| I want to get even with the firm | | 3.76 | .92 | 1 | 5 |
| I want to make the firm get what it deserves | | 3.87 | .88 | 1 | 5 |
| Were you asked to rate your experience with stars first, before writing a public review about your order? (1 = yes; 2 = no) | | 1.15 | .36 | 1 | 2 |
| Were you asked to write a public review about your order first, before rating your experience with stars? (1 = yes; 2 = no) | | 1.15 | .35 | 1 | 2 |
| **Controls** | | | | | |
| On a scale of 1 – 7, how likely are you to order groceries from online delivery providers? (1 = not at all; 7 = very likely) | | 4.91 | 1.75 | 1 | 7 |
| How often do you order from online food delivery providers? (1 = never; 2 = once a year; 3 = once every few months; 4 = every month; 5 = every week; 6 = every few days; 7 = every day) | | 4.55 | 1.33 | 1 | 7 |
| **Gender** (1 = male, 2 = female, 3 = non-binary/ third gender, 4 = prefer not to say) | | 1.47 | .51 | 1 | 4 |
| **Age** (1 = 18-24; 2 = 25-34; 3 = 35-44; 4 = 45-54; 5 = 55-64; 6 = 65-74; 7 = 75+) | | 2.63 | .93 | 1 | 7 |

### *Table BB4*
### *Study 2 means*

| | **Review condition** | |
|---|---|---|
| (N = 432) | Rate first condition (N = 215) | Review first condition (N = 217) |
| **Manipulation checks** | | |
| Rate first (1 = yes; 2 = no) | 1.06*** | 1.24*** |
| Review first (1 = yes; 2 = no) | 1.25*** | 1.05*** |
| **Mediator** | | |
| Rumination | 3.59 $^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 3.63 $^{\text{n.s.}}$ |
| Rumination intensity | 1.42 $^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 1.49 $^{\text{n.s.}}$ |
| **DV** | | |
| Vengeful behavior | 3.72 $^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 3.70 $^{\text{n.s.}}$ |
| **Controls** | | |
| Order likelihood | 5.22 $^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 5.10 $^{\text{n.s.}}$ |
| Order frequency | 4.59 $^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 4.52 $^{\text{n.s.}}$ |
| Age (1= 18-24; 2 = 25-34; 3 = 35-44; 4 = 45-54; 5 = 55-64; 6 = 65-74; 7 =75+) | 2.64 $^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 2.63 $^{\text{n.s.}}$ |
| Gender (1 = male, 2 = female, 3 = non-binary/third gender; 4 = prefer not to say) | 1.48 $^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 1.46 $^{\text{n.s.}}$ |

****p* < .001, ***p* < .01, **p* < .05.

### *Table BB5*
### *Study 3 measurement items and reliabilities*

| | **Booking.com data** | | **TripAdvisor data** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean | Standard deviation | Mean | Standard deviation |
| **LIWC coded hostility** | 37.95 | 51.98 | 56.51 | 34.46 |
| **Tone** | 4.398 | 14.605 | 16.945 | 26.023 |
| **Star rating** | 4.64 | 0.619 | 4.08 | 1.152 |
| **Word count** | 20.14 | .478 | 119.22 | 109.93 |

### *Table BB6*
### *Study 5 measurement items and reliabilities*

| Items *(1= not at all; strongly disagree,5/7= very much; strongly agree)* | Reliabilities | Mean | SD | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Rumination** | *r* = .83 | 3.76 | .92 | 1 | 5 |
| I can't stop thinking about how I was wronged by this company | | 3.83 | .99 | 1 | 5 |
| Memories about this company's wrongful actions have limited my enjoyment of life | | 3.82 | .96 | 1 | 5 |
| I have a hard time getting thoughts of how I was mistreated out of my head | | 3.76 | .97 | 1 | 5 |
| I try to figure out the reasons why this company hurt me | | 3.78 | .98 | 1 | 5 |
| The wrong I suffered is never far from my mind | | 3.91 | .90 | 1 | 5 |
| I find myself replaying the events over and over in my mind | | | | | |
| **Vengeful behavior** | *r* = .76 | | | | |
| I want to take actions to get the firm in trouble | | 3.79 | .99 | 1 | 5 |
| I want to punish the firm in some way | | 3.86 | .98 | 1 | 5 |
| I want to cause inconvenience to the firm | | 3.87 | .94 | 1 | 5 |
| I want to get even with the firm | | 3.86 | .95 | 1 | 5 |
| I want to make the firm get what it deserves | | 3.88 | .92 | 1 | 5 |
| **Manipulation check** | | | | | |
| Were you asked to rate your experience with stars first, before writing a public review about your order? (1 = yes; 2 = no) | | 1.13 | .34 | 1 | 2 |
| Were you asked to write a public review about your order first, before rating your experience with stars? (1 = yes; 2 = no) | | 1.28 | .46 | 1 | 2 |
| **Controls** | | | | | |
| On a scale of 1 – 7, how likely are you to book a serviced apartment on a BnB platform? (1 = not at all; 7= very likely) | | 4.59 | 1.73 | 1 | 7 |
| How often do you book an apartment on a BnB platform? (1= never; 2 = once a year; 3 = once every few months; 4 = every month; 5 = every week; 6 = every few days; 7 = every day) | | 3.57 | 1.60 | 1 | 7 |
| **Gender** (1 = male, 2 = female, 3 = non-binary/ third gender, 4 = prefer not to say) | | 1.41 | .51 | 1 | 4 |
| **Age** (1 = 18-24; 2 = 25-34; 3 = 35-44; 4 = 45-54; 5 = 55-64; 6 = 65-74; 7 = 75+) | | 2.48 | .92 | 1 | 7 |
| **Machiavellianism** | | | | | |
| In the past, I have used deceit to get my way | *r* = .86 | 5.08 | 1.48 | 1 | 7 |
| I have used flattery to get my way | | 5.20 | 1.51 | 1 | 7 |
| At times, I have manipulated others to get my own way | | 5.18 | 1.60 | 1 | 7 |
| **Narcissism** | *r* = .82 | | | | |
| I tend to want others to admire me | | 5.27 | 1.44 | 1 | 7 |
| I tend to want others to pay attention to me | | 5.33 | 1.45 | 1 | 7 |
| I tend to seek prestige or status | | 5.27 | 1.46 | 1 | 7 |
| **Psychopathy** | *r* = .86 | | | | |
| I sometimes lack remorse | | 5.16 | 1.52 | 1 | 7 |
| I can be insensitive at times | | 5.23 | 1.54 | 1 | 7 |
| I can be cynical at times | | 5.33 | 1.45 | 1 | 7 |

### *Table BB7*
### *Study 5 means*

| | **Review condition** | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **(N = 897)** | Rate first condition (N = 328) | Review first condition (N = 288) | Mixed condition (N = 281) |
| **Manipulation checks** | | | |
| Rate first | 1.01$^{***}$ | 1.37$^{***}$ | 1.03$^{***}$ |
| Review first | 1.36$^{***}$ | 1.07$^{***}$ | 1.40$^{***}$ |
| **Mediator** | | | |
| Rumination | 3.86$^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 3.77$^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 3.78$^{\text{n.s.}}$ |
| Rumination intensity | 2.29$^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 2.22$^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 2.24$^{\text{n.s.}}$ |
| **DV** | | | |
| Vengeful behavior | 3.87$^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 3.85$^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 3.81$^{\text{n.s.}}$ |
| Manually coded aggression | 2.21$^{***}$ | 2.78$^{***}$ | 2.71$^{***}$ |
| LIWC coded tone of review (higher value indicates more negative tone) | 32.29$^{*}$ | 39.91$^{*}$ | 39.89$^{*}$ |
| Star rating | 3.28$^{a}$ | 3.06$^{a}$ | 3.11$^{a}$ |
| **Controls** | | | |
| Booking likelihood | 4.72$^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 4.48$^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 4.56$^{\text{n.s.}}$ |
| Booking frequency | 3.71$^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 3.51$^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 3.57$^{\text{n.s.}}$ |
| **Dark triad personality** | | | |
| Machiavellianism | 5.24$^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 5.11$^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 5.09$^{\text{n.s.}}$ |
| Narcissism | 5.30$^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 5.22$^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 5.33$^{\text{n.s.}}$ |
| Psychopathy | 5.34$^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 5.20$^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 5.15$^{\text{n.s.}}$ |
| Age (1 = 18-24; 2 = 25-34; 3 = 35-44; 4 = 45-54; 5 = 55-64; 6 = 65-74; 7 =75+) | 2.42$^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 2.55$^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 2.47$^{\text{n.s}}$. |
| Gender (1 = male, 2 = female, 3 = non-binary/third gender; 4 = prefer not to say) | 1.42$^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 1.40$^{\text{n.s.}}$ | 1.41$^{\text{n.s.}}$ |

***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$; $^{a}$ denotes marginal significance of $p < .10$.

### *Table BB8*
### *Study 6 Measurement Items and Reliabilities*

| Items *(1= not at all; strongly disagree,5/7= very much; strongly agree)* | Reliabilities | Mean | SD | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Rumination** | *r* = .92 | 3.38 | 1.16 | 1 | 5 |
| I can't stop thinking about how I was wronged by this company | | 3.45 | 1.22 | 1 | 5 |
| Memories about this company's wrongful actions have limited my enjoyment of life | | 3.45 | 1.18 | 1 | 5 |
| I have a hard time getting thoughts of how I was mistreated out of my head | | 3.47 | 1.21 | 1 | 5 |
| I try to figure out the reasons why this company hurt me | | 3.41 | 1.20 | 1 | 5 |
| The wrong I suffered is never far from my mind | | 3.55 | 1.15 | 1 | 5 |
| I find myself replaying the events over and over in my mind | | | | | |
| **Vengeful behavior** | *r* = .89 | | | | |
| I want to take actions to get the firm in trouble | | 3.36 | 1.16 | 1 | 5 |
| I want to punish the firm in some way | | 3.39 | 1.25 | 1 | 5 |
| I want to cause inconvenience to the firm | | 3.40 | 1.22 | 1 | 5 |
| I want to get even with the firm | | 3.57 | 1.18 | 1 | 5 |
| I want to make the firm get what it deserves | | 3.61 | 1.13 | 1 | 5 |
| **Manipulation check** | | | | | |
| On a scale of 1 – 7, how positive or negative would you rate your experience with the at-home massage app? (1 = very positive; 7 = very negative) | | 2.37 | 1.2 | 1 | 7 |
| Were you asked to rate your experience with stars first, before writing a public review about your order? (1 = yes; 2 = no) | | 1.24 | .441 | 1 | 2 |
| Were you asked to write a public review about your order first, before rating your experience with stars? (1 = yes; 2 = no) | | 1.24 | .454 | 1 | 2 |
| **Controls** | | | | | |
| On a scale of 1 – 7, how, likely are you to book an at-home massage through a massage app? | | 5.34 | 1.50 | 1 | 7 |
| How often do you book an at-home massage through massage app? (1 = never; 2 = once a year; 3 = once every few months; 4 = every month; 5 = every week; 6 = every few days; 7 = every day) | | | | | |
| | | 3.98 | 1.50 | 1 | 7 |
| **Gender** (1 = male, 2 = female, 3 = non-binary/ third gender, 4 = prefer not to say) | | 1.52 | .561 | 1 | 4 |
| **Age** (1 = 18-24; 2 = 25-34; 3 = 35-44; 4 = 45-54; 5 = 55-64; 6 = 65-74; 7 = 75+) | | 2.59 | .958 | 1 | 7 |

### *Table BB9*
### *Study 6 means*

| | **Review condition** | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Rate first** | | | | **Review first** | | | |
| (N = 2756) | High severity failure (N = 349) | Low severity failure (N = 348) | Control (N = 338) | Positive experience (N = 357) | High severity failure (N = 369) | Low severity failure (N = 342) | Control (N = 325) | Positive experience (N = 329) |
| **Manipulation checks** | | | | | | | | |
| Rate first | $1.05^{***}$ | $1.02^{***}$ | $1.06^{***}$ | $1.03^{***}$ | $1.48^{***}$ | $1.41^{***}$ | $1.42^{***}$ | $1.42^{***}$ |
| Review first | $1.41^{***}$ | $1.41^{***}$ | $1.48^{***}$ | $1.39^{***}$ | $1.06^{***}$ | $1.05^{***}$ | $1.05^{***}$ | $1.02^{***}$ |
| Severity | $2.79^{***}$ | $2.32^{***}$ | $2.09^{***}$ | $2.04^{***}$ | $2.91^{***}$ | $2.45^{***}$ | $2.25^{***}$ | $2.09^{***}$ |
| **Mediator** | | | | | | | | |
| Rumination | $3.54^{a}$ | $3.40^{a}$ | $3.34^{a}$ | $3.46^{a}$ | $3.55^{a}$ | $3.40^{a}$ | $3.48^{a}$ | $3.40^{a}$ |
| **DV** | | | | | | | | |
| Vengeful behavior | $3.59^{**}$ | $3.43^{**}$ | $3.38^{**}$ | $3.46^{**}$ | $3.61^{**}$ | $3.38^{**}$ | $3.43^{**}$ | $3.38^{**}$ |
| Manually coded aggression | $.24^{***}$ | $.07^{***}$ | $.04^{***}$ | $.04^{***}$ | $.43^{***}$ | $.12^{***}$ | $.03^{***}$ | $.05^{***}$ |
| Star rating | $3.62^{***}$ | $4.07^{***}$ | $4.10^{***}$ | $4.28^{***}$ | $3.63^{***}$ | $3.99^{***}$ | $4.14^{***}$ | $4.22^{***}$ |
| **Controls** | | | | | | | | |
| At-home massage booking likelihood | $4.99^{***}$ | $5.43^{***}$ | $5.46^{***}$ | $5.69^{***}$ | $4.91^{***}$ | $5.37^{***}$ | $5.46^{***}$ | $5.43^{***}$ |
| At-home massage booking frequency | $3.91^{\text{n.s.}}$ | $3.99^{\text{n.s.}}$ | $4.00^{\text{n.s.}}$ | $4.15^{\text{n.s.}}$ | $3.96^{\text{n.s.}}$ | $3.96^{\text{n.s.}}$ | $3.99^{\text{n.s.}}$ | $4.02^{\text{n.s.}}$ |
| Age (1 = 18-24; 2 = 25-34; 3 = 35-44; 4 = 45-54; 5 = 55-64; 6 = 65-74; 7 =75+) | $2.61^{\text{n.s.}}$ | $2.65^{\text{n.s.}}$ | $2.58^{\text{n.s.}}$ | $2.49^{\text{n.s.}}$ | $2.62^{\text{n.s.}}$ | $2.64^{\text{n.s.}}$ | $2.58^{\text{n.s.}}$ | $2.60^{\text{n.s.}}$ |
| Gender (1 = male, 2 = female**,** 3 = non-binary/third gender; 4 = prefer not to say) | $1.56^{a.}$ | $1.50^{a}$ | $1.50^{a}$ | $1.54^{a}$ | $1.50^{a}$ | $1.53^{a}$ | $1.46^{a}$ | $1.58^{a}$ |

***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$, $^{a}p < .10$.

### *Table BB10*
### *Study 7 measurement items*

| Items *(1= not at all; strongly disagree, 5/7= very much; strongly agree)* | Reliabilities | Mean | SD | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Rumination** | | | | | |
| To what extent did you focus on how you were wronged by the company? | | 3.35 | 1.33 | 1 | 5 |
| To what extent did you focus on all aspects of the service? | | 3.24 | 1.28 | 1 | 5 |
| **Manipulation Check** | | | | | |
| On a scale of 1 – 5, how severe would you rate the service failure presented to you? | | 3.67 | 1.13 | 1 | 5 |
| Were you asked to rate your experience with stars first, before writing a public review about your order? (1 = yes; 2 = no) | | 1.40 | .50 | 1 | 2 |
| Were you asked to write a public review about your order first, before rating your experience with stars? (1 = yes; 2 = no) | | 1.39 | .50 | 1 | 2 |
| **Controls** | | | | | |
| On a scale of 1 – 7, how, likely are you to order meals from online food delivery providers? | | 4.26 | 1.89 | 1 | 7 |
| **Gender** (1 = male, 2 = female, 3 = non-binary/ third gender, 4 = prefer not to say) | | 1.46 | .51 | 1 | 4 |
| **Age** (1 = 18-24; 2 = 25-34; 3 = 35-44; 4 = 45-54; 5 = 55-64; 6 = 65-74; 7 = 75+) | | 2.99 | 1.3 | 1 | 7 |

### *Table BB11*
### *Study 7 means*

| | **Closed-form rating first** | | **Open-form review first** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| (N = 532) | High severity failure (N = 138) | Low severity failure (N = 128) | High severity failure (N = 141) | Low severity failure (N = 125) |
| **Manipulation checks** | | | | |
| Rate first | 1.04$^{***}$ | 1.05$^{***}$ | 1.76$^{***}$ | 1.76$^{***}$ |
| Review first | 1.73$^{***}$ | 1.73$^{***}$ | 1.06$^{***}$ | 1.06$^{***}$ |
| Severity | 4.24$^{***}$ | 3.10$^{***}$ | 4.09$^{***}$ | 3.18$^{***}$ |
| **Mediator** | | | | |
| Failure-focused rumination | 3.67$^{***}$ | 2.97$^{***}$ | 3.75$^{***}$ | 2.92$^{***}$ |
| Holistic-focused rumination | 3.56$^{***}$ | 3.67$^{***}$ | 2.85$^{***}$ | 2.87$^{***}$ |
| **DV** | | | | |
| Vengefulness of written review | .46$^{***}$ | .16$^{***}$ | .84$^{***}$ | .25$^{***}$ |
| **Controls** | | | | |
| Online meal order likelihood | 3.84$^{***}$ | 4.79$^{***}$ | 4.56$^{***}$ | 4.95$^{***}$ |
| Age (1 = 18-24; 2 = 25-34; 3 = 35-44; 4 = 45-54; 5 = 55-64; 6 = 65-74; 7 =75+) | 3.03$^{n.s.}$ | 3.02$^{n.s.}$ | 2.86$^{n.s.}$ | 3.04$^{n.s.}$ |
| Gender (1 = male, 2 = female, 3 = non-binary/third gender; 4 = prefer not to say) | 1.43$^{n.s.}$ | 1.41$^{n.s.}$ | 1.45$^{n.s.}$ | 1.55$^{n.s.}$ |

***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$; $^{a}p < .10$.

## Section BC: Study design

### *Section BC1: Study 1 design*

| Severity of failure | Manipulation |
|---|---|
| Control | You have placed an order for your favorite restaurant at a famous delivery platform. You received a **free desert** with your order. |
| Low Severity | You have placed an order for your favorite restaurant at a famous delivery platform. After you receive your order, you realize that the platform delivered **the wrong side** dish to you. You contact the platform through the in-app chat function and **receive a refund**. |
| High severity | You have placed an order for your favorite restaurant at a famous delivery platform. After you receive your order, you realized that the platform delivered the wrong order to you. **On top of that, the order they delivered contains a dish you are allergic to.** You contact the platform through the in-app chat function. **No one responds through the app. You then call the consumer service, but you do not get a resolution from the company, they are not willing to bring you a new order.** |

### ***Section BC2: Study 2 design***

| Condition | Manipulation |
|---|---|
| Rate | You have placed an order for your favorite restaurant at a famous delivery platform. After you receive your order, you realize that the platform **delivered the wrong order** to you. On top of that, **the order they delivered contains a dish you are allergic to**. You contact the platform through the in-app chat function, but **do not receive a resolution**. You decide to **leave a review through the delivery platform.** |
| Review | You have placed an order for your favorite restaurant at a famous delivery platform. After you receive your order, you realize that the platform **delivered the wrong order** to you. On top of that, **the order they delivered contains a dish you are allergic to**. You contact the platform through the in-app chat function, but **do not receive a resolution**. You decide to **leave a review through the delivery platform.** |

### *Section BC3: Study 5 design*

| Severity of failure | Manipulation |
|---|---|
| Rate first | You have booked a stay at a serviced apartment through a famous BnB booking platform. After you arrive at the location of the apartment, you realize that the room is much smaller than what you paid for with fewer beds too. On top of that, the room does not match the pictures and the description on the booking platform. You call the BnB booking platform, but do not receive a resolution and do not get any money back. You are asked to **rate your booking first**, before writing a public review of your booking. |
| Review first | You have booked a stay at a serviced apartment through a famous BnB booking platform. After you arrive at the location of the apartment, you realize that the room is much smaller than what you paid for with fewer beds too. On top of that, the room does not match the pictures and the description on the booking platform. You call the BnB booking platform, but do not receive a resolution and do not get any money back. You are asked **to write a public review of your booking first,** before rating your booking. |
| Mixed condition | You have booked a stay at a serviced apartment through a famous BnB booking platform. After you arrive at the location of the apartment, you realize that the room is much smaller than what you paid for with fewer beds too. On top of that, the room does not match the pictures and the description on the booking platform. You call the BnB booking platform, but do not receive a resolution and do not get any money back. You are asked to **rate your booking first**, before writing a public review of your booking. |

## *Section BC4: Study 6 design*

| Rate condition | Severity of failure | Manipulation |
|---|---|---|
| Rate first | Severe | You have ordered an at-home massage through a famous home massage app. However, the masseuse arrived 20 minutes late. On top of that, they did not deliver the full one-hour massage you paid for. You are asked **to rate your experience with the app first,** before leaving a review through the massage app. |
|  | Low Severity | You have ordered an at-home massage through a famous home massage app. However, the masseuse arrived later than expected, but still delivered the full one-hour massage you paid for. You are asked **to rate your experience with the app first,** before leaving a review through the massage app. |
|  | Control | You have ordered an at-home massage through a famous home massage app. The masseuse arrived on time and delivered the one-hour massage you paid for. You are asked **to rate your experience with the app,** before leaving a review through the massage app. |
|  | Positive | You have ordered an at-home massage through a famous home massage app. The masseuse arrived on time, and you received an amazing one-hour massage, and a free massage oil as a gift. You are asked **to rate your experience with the app,** before leaving a review through the massage app. |
| Review first | Severe | You have ordered an at-home massage through a famous home massage app. However, the masseuse arrived 20 minutes late. On top of that, they did not deliver the full one-hour massage you paid for. You are asked **to write a public review of your experience with the app first,** before rating your experience. |
|  | Low Severity | You have ordered an at-home massage through a famous home massage app. However, the masseuse arrived later than expected, but still delivered the full one-hour massage you paid for. You are asked **to write a public review of your experience with the app first,** before rating your experience. |
|  | Control | You have ordered an at-home massage through a famous home massage app. The masseuse arrived on time and delivered the one-hour massage you paid for. You are asked **to write a public review of your experience with the app first,** before rating your experience. |
|  | Positive | You have ordered an at-home massage through a famous home massage app. The masseuse arrived on time, and you received an amazing one-hour massage, and a free massage oil as a gift. You are asked **to write a public review of your experience with the app first,** before rating your experience. |

### ***Section BC5: Study 7 design***

| Severity of failure | Manipulation |
|---|---|
| Low Severity | You have placed an order for your favorite restaurant at a famous delivery platform. After you receive your order, you realize that the platform delivered **the wrong side** dish to you. You contact the platform through the in-app chat function and **receive a refund**. |
| High severity | You have placed an order for your favorite restaurant at a famous delivery platform. After you receive your order, you realized that the platform delivered the wrong order to you. **On top of that, the order they delivered contains a dish you are allergic to.** You contact the platform through the in-app chat function. **No one responds through the app. You then call the consumer service, but you do not get a resolution from the company, they are not willing to bring you a new order.** |

## Section BD: Moderation & mediation analyses

### *Table BD1*
### *Study 5, moderation analysis 1*

| | **Y (intention to engage in vengeful behavior)** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | b | SE | t | p | 95% CI | |
| Constant | 1.6681 | .1349 | 12.3676 | <.001 | 1.4034 | 1.9328 |
| X (Rumination) | .5735 | .0344 | 16.9498 | <.001 | .5059 | .6411 |
| W (Rate condition) | -.3517 | .1053 | -3.3392 | <.001 | -.5584 | -.1450 |
| Int (Rate condition × Rumination) | .0922 | .0271 | 3.4056 | .0007 | .0391 | .1453 |
| Closed form first | .5735 | .0344 | 16.6498 | <.001 | .5059 | .6411 |
| Open form first | .6657 | .0228 | 29.1421 | <.001 | .6209 | .7105 |
| Mixed condition | .7579 | .0364 | 20.8384 | <.001 | .6865 | .8293 |
| Model summary | $R^2 = .48$, $F(3,893) = 284.76$, $p < .0001$ | | | | | |

### *Table BD2*
### *Study 5, moderation analysis 2*

| | **Y (intention to engage in vengeful behavior)** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | b | SE | t | p | 95% CI | |
| Constant | 2.7281 | .0864 | 31.5622 | <.001 | 2.5584 | 2.8977 |
| X (Rumination intensity) | .5044 | .0361 | 13.9641 | <.001 | .4335 | .5753 |
| W (Rate condition) | -.1996 | .0671 | -2.9748 | .0030 | -.3312 | -.0679 |
| Int (Rate condition × Rumination intensity) | .0826 | .0281 | 2.9381 | .0034 | .0274 | .1378 |
| Closed form first | .5044 | .0361 | 13.96 | <.001 | .4335 | .5753 |
| Open form first | .5871 | .0238 | 24.6746 | <.001 | .5404 | .6337 |
| Mixed condition | .6697 | .0375 | 17.8427 | <.001 | .5960 | .7433 |
| Model summary | $R^2 = .41$, $F(3,893) = 204.76$, $p < .0001$ | | | | | |

### *Table BD3*
### *Study 7, moderated mediation analysis*

| **A: Rumination model summary** | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Y (holistic-focused rumination)** | | | | | |
| | **b** | **SE** | **t** | **p** | **95% CI** | |
| **Constant** | 1.64 | .2387 | 19.44 | <.001 | 4.17 | 5.11 |
| **X (Severity)** | -.0847 | .0507 | -1.66 | .0956 | -.1844 | .0150 |
| **M (failure-focused rumination)** | -.2149 | .0559 | -3.84 | <.001 | -.3248 | -.1051 |
| **W (Rate condition)** | -1.50 | .2840 | -5.30 | <.001 | -2.06 | -.9481 |
| **Int (Rate condition × Rumination)** | .2252 | .0788 | 2.85 | .0044 | .0704 | .3801 |
| **Model summary** | $R^2 = .12$, F (4,527) = 18.60, p<.001 | | | | | |
| **B: Moderated mediation model on rumination** | | | | | | |
| | **Y (vengefulness of review)** | | | | | |
| | **b** | **SE** | **Z** | **P** | **95%CI** | |
| **Constant** | -2.66 | .4665 | -5.71 | <.001 | -3.57 | -1.74 |
| **X (Severity)** | .5776 | .0971 | 5.95 | <.0001 | .3874 | .7679 |
| **M (failure-focused rumination)** | .2737 | .0796 | 3.43 | .0006 | .1177 | .4297 |
| **Holistic-focused rumination** | -.2065 | .0763 | -2.70 | .0068 | -.3561 | -.0570 |
| **C: Conditional Indirect Effects of (X) at values of (W) through (M) on Vengefulness of Written Review** | | | | | | |
| | **B** | **SE** | **LLCI** | | **ULCI** | |
| **Closed-form rating first** | .0217 | .0102 | .0055 | | .0452 | |
| **Open-form review first** | -.0010 | .0075 | -.0163 | | .0153 | |
| **D: Mediated Moderation Index** | | | | | | |
| | **B** | **SE** | **LLCI** | | **ULCI** | |
| | -.0227 | .0123 | -.0508 | | -.0032 | |

### Section BE: LIWC vengeful behavior dictionary

- Anger
- Apprehension
- Frustration
- Rage
- Fury
- Despair
- Confusion
- Anxiety
- Hatred
- Sadness
- Fear
- Resentment
- Terror
- Impatience
- Pain
- Dismay
- Misery
- Bitterness
- Dread
- Loathing
- Consciousness
- Discomfort
- Embarrassment
- Arrogance
- Tears
- Guilt
- Curiosity
- Sickening
- Sudden
- Agitation
- Sorrow
- Ignorance
- Stupidity
- Feelings
- Malice
- Revulsion
- Unhappiness
- Cynicism
- Coldness
- Boredom
- Temper
- Rigidity
- Jealous
- Caution
- Distress
- Tension
- Utter
- Apathy
- Shriek
- Nerves
- Difficulties
- Conscience
- Temptation
- Annoyance
- Cruelty
- Suddenness
- Disgust
- Urgency
- Anguish
- Intensity
- Panic
- Displeasure
- Numbness
- Exhaustion
- Sobbing
- Agonies
- Self-control
- Courage
- Superiority
- Disappointment
- Helplessness
- Purpose
- Lowdown
- Senseless
- Madness
- Reason
- Heartbroken
- Such an idiot
- Distraught
- Terrible
- Horrible
- Awful
- Painful
- Terrifying
- Brutal
- Ridiculous
- Atrocious
- Bad
- Hopeless
- Strange
- Rare
- Depressing
- Weird
- Crazy
- Sad
- Embarrassing
- Tragic
- Traumatizing
- Disgusting
- Pathetic
- Fucked up
- Bitter
- Shocking
- Worse
- Unbelievable
- Ironic
- Creepy
- Frightening
- Stupid
- Outrageous
- Devastating
- Dangerous
- Traumatic
- Raging
- Appalling
- Bearable
- Rough
- Stressful
- Foolish
- Dumb
- Very bad
- Rash
- Unfair
- Tough
- Disappointing
- Unprofessional
- Unspeakable
- Difficult
- Cruel
- Short-sighted
- Sad because
- Bad enough
- Worst thing
- Unhealthy
- Miserable

- Severe
- Wrong
- Nightmare
- Even worse
- Infuriating
- Serious
- Unpredictable
- Nasty exhausting
- Out of control
- Odd
- Worst
- Annoy
- Interrupt
- Condemn
- Criticize
- Provoke
- Suffer
- Accuse
- Confront
- Crease
- Disappoint
- Discourage
- Trouble
- Difficult
- Problems
- Serious trouble
- So much trouble
- No sense
- Too much trouble
- Mistake
- Hard time
- Bad
- Really bad
- Terrible
- Horrible
- Pretty bad
- So bad
- Shitty
- Too bad
- Bad thing
- As bad as
- Not that bad
- Negative
- Not good
- Pissed off
- Dumbest
- Saddest
- Cheating
- Cheated

# APPENDIX C: What is Influencer Authenticity, and How Can Brands Work with Influencers to Create Authentic Branded Content?

## Section CA: Method and Data

*Table CA1*
*Table of Research Respondents*

| Consumer Respondent | Profile | Location | Occupation/ Industry | Social media habits and familiarity with influencer marketing |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **CON1** | Consumer, 19-25 years, Female | United Kingdom | Student | Uses social media daily, follows several influences, shops influencer-advertised content 1-2 per month |
| **CON2** | Consumer, 25-30 years, Male | United Kingdom | Business | Uses social media daily, follows > 10 influences, shops influencer-advertised content 3-4 per week |
| **CON3** | Consumer, 19-25 years, Male | United States | Student | Uses social media weekly, follows several influences, shops influencer-advertised content monthly |
| **CON4** | Consumer, 26-35 years, Female | United States | Law | Uses social media daily, follows several influences, shops influencer-advertised regularly |
| **CON5** | Consumer, 19-25 years, Female | Malaysia | Student | Uses social media weekly, follows several influences |
| **CON6** | Consumer, 26-35 years, Male | Malaysia | Finance | Uses social media daily, follows > 15 influences, shops influencer-advertised content 4-6 per month |
| **CON7** | Consumer, 19-25 years, Female | Singapore | Student | Uses social media daily, follows several influences, shops influencer-advertised content weekly |
| **CON8** | Consumer, 36-45 years, Female | United States | Business | Uses social media daily, follows > 10 influences, shops influencer-advertised content regularly |
| **CON9** | Consumer, 19-25 years, Male | China | Student | Uses social media daily, follows several influences, shops influencer-advertised content 3-4 per month |
| **CON10** | Consumer, 46-55 years, Female | United States | Business | Uses social media daily, follows > 10 influences |
| **CON11** | Consumer, 19-25 years, Male | Nigeria | Student | Uses social media daily, follows several influences |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| **CON12** | Consumer, 26-35 years, Female | Dubai | Business | Uses social media daily, follows several influences |
| **CON13** | Consumer, 46-55 years, Female | Canada | Business | Uses social media weekly, follows several influences, shops influencer-advertised content 1-3 per month |
| **CON14** | Consumer, 36-45 years, Male | Germany | Business | Uses social media daily, follows several influences, shops influencer-advertised content regularly |
| **CON15** | Consumer, 26-35 years, Male | Singapore | Business | Uses social media daily, follows > 20 influences, shops influencer-advertised content regularly |
| **CON16** | Consumer, 36-45 years, Female | China | Business | Uses social media daily, follows several influences, shops influencer-advertised content weekly |
| **CON17** | Consumer, 19-25 years, Male | Canada | Student | Uses social media daily, follows several influences |
| **CON18** | Consumer, 19-25 years, Female | Italy | Student | Uses social media every day, shops influencer-advertised content often |
| **CON19** | Consumer, 19-25 years, Female | United States | Student | Uses social media every day, follows influencers regularly, shops influencer-advertised content monthly |
| **CON20** | Consumer, 19-25 years, Female | United States | Student | Uses social media every day, follows influencers regularly, shops influencer-advertised content monthly |
| **CON21** | Consumer, 19-25 years, Male | United States | Student | Uses social media every day, follows influencers regularly, shops influencer-advertised content monthly |
| **CON22** | Consumer, 19-25 years, Female | India | Student | Uses social media every day, follows influencers regularly, shops influencer-advertised content monthly |
| **CON23** | Consumer, 19-25 years, Female | United States | Student | Uses social media every day, follows influencers regularly, shops influencer-advertised content monthly |
| **CON24** | Consumer, 19-25 years, Female | United States | Student | Uses social media every day, follows influencers regularly, shops influencer-advertised content monthly |
| **CON25** | Consumer, 19-25 years, Male | United States | Student | Uses social media every day, follows influencers regularly, has a following on TikTok |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| **CON26** | Consumer, 26-35 years, Male | Eritrea | Business | Uses social media daily, follows several influences |
| **CON27** | Consumer, 46-55 years, Male | India | Hospitality | Uses social media daily, follows > 20 influences, shops influencer-advertised content weekly |
| **CON28** | Consumer, 25-30 years, Female | United States | Law | Uses social media monthly, follows several influences, shops influencer-advertised content 1-2 per month |
| **CON29** | Consumer, 25-30 years, Female | Spain | Finance | Uses social media daily, follows several influences, shops influencer-advertised content weekly |
| **CON30** | Consumer, 55-65 years, Male | Australia | Business | Uses social media daily, follows > 10 influences, shops influencer-advertised content 3-4 per month |
| **CON31** | Consumer, 25-30 years, Male | India | Business | Uses social media daily, follows several influences, shops influencer-advertised content weekly |
| **CON32** | Consumer, 35-45 years, Female | United Kingdom | Hospitality | Uses social media daily, follows > 20 influences, shops influencer-advertised content 1-2 per week |
| **CON33** | Consumer, 55-60 years, Female | Canada | Business | Uses social media daily, follows > 10 influences, shops influencer-advertised content regularly |
| **CON34** | Consumer, 25-30 years, Male | Brazil | Business | Uses social media daily, follows several influences, shops influencer-advertised content 2-3 per month |
| **CON35** | Consumer 25-35 years, Female | United States | Hospitality | Uses social media daily, follows several influences |
| **CON36** | Consumer, 35-45 years, Male | Chile | Law | Uses social media daily, follows > 10 influences, shops influencer-advertised content monthly |
| **CON37** | Consumer, 45-55 years, Female | Nigeria | Finance | Uses social media daily, follows several influences, shops influencer-advertised content regularly |
| **CON38** | Consumer 25-35 years, Male | United Kingdom | Business | Uses social media daily, follows > 5 influencers, shops influencer-advertised content regularly |
| **CON39** | Consumer, 19-25 years, Male | United Kingdom | Student | Uses social media daily, follows > 5 influencers, shops |

|  |  |  |  |  |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |  | influencer-advertised content monthly |
| **CON40** | Consumer 25-35 years, Female | Greece | Law | Uses social media daily, follows several influences, shops influencer-advertised content regularly |
| **CON 41 – CON234** | Consumers recruited through MTurk |  |  |  |

| **Influencer Respondent** | **Profile** | **Location** | **Social Media Platform** | **Domain and experience, # of brands they work with** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **INF1** | Influencer, 19-25 years, Male | Malaysia | YouTube, Instagram | Fashion and beauty, 10-15 brands |
| **INF2** | Influencer, 26-35 years, Female | Malaysia | YouTube, Instagram | Toys and collectables, 5-10 brands |
| **INF3** | Influencer, 19-25 years, Female | Malaysia | YouTube, Instagram | Fashion and beauty, 15-20 brands |
| **INF4** | Influencer, 26-35 years, Male | Singapore | YouTube, Instagram | Entertainment, 10-15 brands |
| **INF5** | Influencer, 26-35 years, Male | United States | Twitch, YouTube | Fashion and beauty, 5-10 brands |
| **INF6** | Influencer, 19-25 years, Female | United States | Instagram | Entertainment 5-10 brands |
| **INF7** | Influencer, 36-45 years, Female | Canada | YouTube, Instagram | Finance and investment, 10-15 brands |
| **INF8** | Influencer, 19-25 years, Male | United Kingdom | YouTube, Instagram | Fashion and beauty, 15-20 brands |
| **INF9** | Influencer, 26-35 years, Female | United States | Twitch, YouTube | Toys and collectables, 15-20 brands |
| **INF10** | Influencer, 26-35 years, Male | United States | Twitch | Online gaming, 15-20 brands |
| **INF11** | Influencer, 26-35 years, Female | Canada | YouTube, Instagram | Entertainment, 10-15 brands |
| **INF12** | Influencer, 36-45 years, Male | United States | YouTube, Instagram | Online gaming, 5-10 brands |
| **INF13** | Influencer, 36-45 years, Female | Brunei | Instagram | Fashion and beauty, 5-10 brands |
| **INF14** | Influencer, 26-35 years, Female | Brazil | Instagram, TikTok | Fashion and beauty, 15-20 brands |
| **INF15** | Influencer, 19-25 years, Male | United States | YouTube, Twitch, Instagram | Online gaming, 5-10 brands |
| **INF16** | Influencer, 26-35 years, Female | Mexico | YouTube, Instagram | Health and eating, 15-20 brands |
| **INF17** | Influencer, 19-25 years, Male | United States | YouTube, Instagram | Travel, 5-10 brands |
| **INF18** | Influencer, 19-25 years, Male | United States | YouTube, Instagram | Cooking, 15-20 brands |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| **INF19** | Influencer, 26-35 years, Female | United States | YouTube, TikTok, Instagram | Entertainment, 5-10 brands |
| **INF20** | Influencer 36-45 years, Female | India | YouTube, Instagram | Travel, 10-15 brands |
| **INF21** | Influencer, 19-25 years, Male | United Kingdom | YouTube, Instagram | Fashion and beauty, 10-15 brands |
| **INF22** | Influencer, 45-55 years, Male | United States | YouTube | Outdoor activities, 5-10 brands |
| **INF23** | Influencer, 19-25, Female | Canada | YouTube, Twitch | Online gaming, 10-15 brands |
| **INF24** | Influencer, 26-35 years, Female | Malaysia | YouTube, Instagram, TikTok | Health and eating, 5-10 brands |
| **INF25** | Influencer 19-25 years, Male | Kenya | YouTube, TikTok | Music, 15-20 brands |
| **INF26** | Influencer, 26-35 years, Female | United States | YouTube, Instagram | Travel, 10-15 brands |
| **INF27** | Influencer, 45-55 years, Male | United States | YouTube, Instagram | Cooking and eating, 5-10 brands |
| **INF28** | Influencer, 26-35 years, Female | Singapore | YouTube, TikTok, Instagram | Fashion and beauty, 10-15 brands |
| **INF29** | Influencer, 26-35 years, Male | Mexico | YouTube, TikTok | Music, 5-10 brands |
| **INF30** | Influencer, 19-25 years, Female | Italy | YouTube, Instagram | Travel, 10-15 brands |
| **INF31** | Influencer, 26-35 years, Female | United Kingdom | Instagram | Food, 15-20 brands |
| **INF32** | Influencer, 45-55 years, Male | United States | TikTok | Trading cards, 0-5 brands |
| **INF33** | Influencer, 26-35 years, Female | China | WeChat, Online | Fashion and beauty, 25+ brands |
| **INF34** | Influencer, 19-25 years, Female | Australia | Instagram, Tik Tok | Travel and food, 1-5 brands |
| **INF35** | Influencer, 26-35 years, Male | United States | YouTube, Instagram | Health and exercising, 10-15 brands |
| **INF36** | Influencer, 19-25 years, Female | Korea | Facebook, YouTube, Instagram | Food, 1-5 brands |
| **INF37** | Influencer, 36-45 years, Male | China | WeChat, Online | Gaming, 1-5 brands |
| **INF38** | Influencer, 26-35 years, Female | Spain | Instagram, TikTok | Fashion, 1-5 brands |
| **INF39** | Influencer, 36-45 years, Female | China | WeChat, Online | Online gaming, 5-10 brands |
| **INF40** | Influencer, 26-35 years, Male | Korea | Instagram, KaoKao | Online gaming, 10-15 brands |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| **INF41** | Influencer, 36-45 years, Male | United States | Instagram, YouTube | Travel and eating, 15-20 brands |
| **INF42** | Influencer, 19-25 years, Female | Ireland | Instagram, TikTok | Outdoor activities, 10-15 brands |
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| **Brand Manager Respondent** | **Profile** | **Location** | **Industry** | **Experience with influencer marketing** |
| **BM1** | Brand Manager, 26-35 years, Male | Malaysia | Luxury Skincare | Responsible for hiring influencers for campaigns |
| **BM2** | Brand Manager, 36-45 years, Female | Nigeria | Information Technology | Responsible for brand campaigns and internal branding |
| **BM3** | Brand Manager, 46-55 years, Female | Dubai | Finance | Responsible for hiring influencers for brand campaigns |
| **BM4** | Brand Manager, 36-45 years, Male | Canada | Automotive | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers for campaigns |
| **BM5** | Brand Manager, 26-35 years, Male | Nigeria | Retail | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers for campaigns |
| **BM6** | Brand Manager, 46-55 years, Female | United States | Information Technology | Responsible for hiring influencers for global marketing campaigns |
| **BM7** | Brand Manager, 36-45 years, Male | United Kingdom | Hospitality | Responsible for hiring influencers/managing for campaigns |
| **BM8** | Brand Manager, 26-35 years, Male | United States | Retail | Responsible for brand campaigns |
| **BM9** | Brand Manager, 46-55 years, Female | United States | Insurance | Responsible for hiring influencers for corporate branding campaigns |
| **BM10** | Brand Manager, 26-35 years, Female | Dubai | Hospitality | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers for campaigns |
| **BM11** | Brand Manager, 26-35 years, Female | United Kingdom | Sustainable Fashion | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers for campaigns |
| **BM12** | Brand Manager, 36-45 years, Female | India | Hospitality | Responsible for hiring influencers for campaigns |
| **BM13** | Brand Manager, 46-55 years, Female | United States | Travel | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers for campaigns |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| **BM14** | Brand Manager, 26-35 years, Male | Malaysia | Finance | Responsible for internal branding campaigns |
| **BM15** | Brand Manager, 36-45 years, Female | Canada | Retail | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers for campaigns |
| **BM16** | Brand Manager, 36-45 years, Female | United States | Retail | Responsible for global marketing campaigns |
| **BM17** | Brand Manager, 46-55 years, Male | China | Banking | Responsible for hiring influencers for campaigns |
| **BM18** | Brand Manager, 26-35 years, Male | United Kingdom | Information Technology | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers for global branding campaigns |
| **BM19** | Brand Manager, 36-45 years, Female | United States | Automotive | Responsible for branding campaigns |
| **BM20** | Brand Manager, 25-35 years, Female | Spain | Fashion | Responsible for hiring influencers for campaigns |
| **BM21** | Brand Manager, 36-45 years, Female | Mexico | Fashion | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers for campaigns |
| **BM22** | Brand Manager, 36-45 years, Male | United States | Automotive | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers for campaigns |
| **BM23** | Brand Manager, 25-35 years, Female | Brazil | Information Technology | Responsible for internal branding |
| **BM24** | Brand Manager, 35-45 years, Female | Singapore | Travel | Responsible for global brand campaigns |
| **BM25** | Brand Manager, 55- 65 years, Male | Australia | Retail | Responsible for hiring influencers for campaigns |
| **BM26** | Brand Manager, 35-45 years, Male | Germany | Automotive | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers for campaigns |
| **BM27** | Brand Manager, 25-35 years, Female | United States | Insurance | Responsible for hiring influencers for campaigns |
| **BM28** | Brand Manager, 35-45 years, Female | India | Banking | Responsible for internal and external brand campaigns |
| **BM29** | Brand Manager, 25-35 years, Male | Poland | Information Technology | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers for campaigns |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| **BM30** | Brand Manager, 25-25 years, Female | United States | Retail | Responsible for hiring influencers for campaigns |
| **BM31** | Brand Manager, 25-35 years, Female | Canada | Entertainment | Responsible for hiring influencers for campaigns |
| **BM32** | Brand Manager, 25-35 years, Female | Singapore | Hospitality | Responsible for internal branding |
| **BM33** | Brand Manager, 35-45 years, Male | Germany | Information Technology | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers for campaigns |
| **BM34** | Brand Manager, 35-45 years, Male | Japan | Information Technology | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers for campaigns |
| **BM35** | Brand Manager, 45-55 years, Female | United States | Retail | Responsible for global branding campaigns |
| **BM36** | Brand Manager, 25-35 years, Female | Denmark | Information Technology | Responsible for global branding campaigns |
| **BM37** | Brand Manager, 25-35 years, Male | United States | Retail | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers for campaigns |
| **BM38** | Brand Manager, 25-35 years, Male | China | Information Technology | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers for campaigns |
| **BM39** | Brand Manager, 25-35 years, Female | United States | Fashion | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers for campaigns |
| **BM40** | Brand Manager, 18-25 years, Female | Azerbaijan | Ecommerce | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers for campaigns |
| **BM41** | Brand Manager, 35-45 years, Female | United Kingdom | Pharmaceutical | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers for campaigns |
| **BM42** | Brand Manager, 35-45 years, Male | China | Online Gaming | Responsible for global branding campaigns |
| **BM43** | Brand Manager, 25-35 years, Female | United States | Ecommerce | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers for campaigns |
| **BM44** | Brand Manager, 25-35 years, Male | Costa Rica | Pharmaceutical | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers for campaigns |
| **BM45** | Brand Manager, 45-55 years, Male | China | Gaming | Responsible for global branding campaigns |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| **BM46** | Brand Manager, 35-45 years, Female | Austria | Beverages | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers for campaigns |
| **BM47** | Brand Manager 55-65 years, Male | Japan | Retail | Responsible for local branding campaigns |
| **BM48** | Brand Manager, 35-45 years, Female | Brazil | Information Technology | Responsible for hiring/managing influencers, local campaigns |
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| **Influencer Marketing Agency Respondent** | **Profile** | **Location** | **Industry** | **Role in the agency** |
| **IMA1** | C-level executive, 36-45 years, Male | Sweden | Influencer marketing agency | Strategic lead in an influencer marketing agency |
| **IMA2** | Account manager, 26-35 years, Male | Sweden | Influencer marketing agency | Daily contact with brands and influencers |
| **IMA3** | C-level executive, 26-35 years, Female | United Kingdom | SaaS and influencer marketing agency | Marketing lead in an influencer marketing agency |
| **IMA4** | Brand manager, 36-45 years, Male | United Kingdom | Social media | Social media platform |
| **IMA5** | C-level executive, 46-55 years, Female | United States | Influencer marketing agency | Daily contact with brands and influencers |
| **IMA6** | Account manager, 36-45 years, Male | United States | Social media | Social media platform |
| **IMA7** | C-level executive, 46-55 years, Female | Denmark | Influencer marketing agency | Daily contact with brands and influencers |
| **IMA8** | C-level executive, 36-45 years, Female | United States | Social Media | Social media platform |
| **IMA9** | Account manager, 25-35 years, Male | Canada | Influencer marketing agency | Daily contact with brands and influencers |
| **IMA10** | C-level executive, 45-55 years, Female | United States | Marketing consulting | Daily contact with brands and influencers |
| **IMA11** | Account manager, 36-45 years, Male | India | Social Media | Social media platform |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| **IMA12** | Account manager, 25-35 years, Female | Germany | Marketing consulting | Daily contact with brands and influencers |
| **IMA13** | C-level executive, 25-35 years, Male | United States | Social Media | Social media platform |
| **IMA14** | Account manager, 25-35 years, Female | Brazil | Social Media | Daily contact with brands and influencers |
| **IMA15** | Account manager, 25-35 years, Male | Singapore | Marketing Consulting | Social media platform |
| **IMA16** | C-level executive 36-45 years, Female | United States | Marketing Consulting | Daily contact with brands and influencers |
| **IMA17** | Department head, 45-55 years, Male | New Zealand | Advertising Agency | Daily contact with brands and influencers |
| **IMA18** | Account manager, 36-45 years, Female | India | Marketing Consulting | Daily contact with brands and influencers |
| **IMA19** | Account manager, 25-35 years, Female | United Kingdom | Advertising Agency | Social media platform, daily contact with influencers |
| **IMA20** | Department head, 36-45 years, Female | Italy | Marketing Consulting | Daily contact with brands |
| **IMA21** | C-level executive, 36-45 years, Male | China | Social Media | Daily contact with brands |
| **IMA22** | C-level executive, 36-45 years, Female | Thailand | Marketing Consulting | Daily contact with brands |
| **IMA23** | Department head, 36-45 years, Male | United States | Advertising Consulting | Social media platform, daily contact with brands |
| **IMA24** | Department head, 36-45 years, Female | Australia | Social Media | Daily contact with brands and influencers |
| **IMA25** | Account manager, 25-35 years, Male | Germany | Marketing Consulting | Social media platform, daily contact with brands and influencers |
| **IMA26** | C-level executive 46-55 years, Female | Canada | Advertising Agency | Daily contact with brands |
| **IMA27** | Account manager, 25-35 years, Female | United States | Social Media | Daily contact with brands and influencers |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| **IMA28** | Department head, 36-45 years, Male | China | Advertising Agency | Daily contact with brands |
| **IMA29** | Account manager, 25-35 years, Female | United States | Social media | Social media platform, daily contact with influencers |
| **IMA30** | C-level executive, 56-65 years, Male | Korea | Marketing Consulting | Daily contact with brands |
| **IMA31** | Department head, 36-45 years, Female | Russia | Social Media | Daily contact with brands and influencers |
| **IMA32** | Account manager, 25-35 years, Female | Singapore | Advertising Agency | Social media platform, daily contact with influencers |
| **IMA33** | Department head, 36-45 years, Male | India | Advertising Agency | Daily contact with brands, social media platform |
| **IMA34** | C-level executive, 46-55 years, Female | United States | Marketing Consulting | Daily contact with brands |

*Table CA2*

*Interview Questions*

| Participant profile | Interview Questions |
|---|---|
| **Influencer authenticity (every participant was asked these questions)** | • How would you define an authentic influencer?<br>• What does authenticity mean to you (in the context of brands, in the context of influencers)?<br>• Can you give an example of an influencer that you think is authentic? What makes this influencer authentic in your mind?<br>• How do you define an inauthentic influencer? What makes their content inauthentic in your mind?<br>• Why are some influencers more authentic than others? |
| **Brand managers** | • What main objectives do brands have when they use the influencer?<br>• If you are a manager of a small (large) brand, how do you use influencers, and why do you use influencers?<br>• How do influencers and brands create value together? Is authenticity important for value creation?<br>• Can influencer compensate for the lack of brand authenticity?<br>• How do you perceive the content produced by influencer? How would you define an authentic content produced by an influencer?<br>• Would you consider your brand authentic? Why? Is it important that both your brand and the influencer are perceived as authentic?<br>• Even if a content is perceived to be inauthentic, can it still produce positive reactions?<br>• As a brand manager, how do you find influencers?<br>• As a brand manager, what is influencer authenticity to you? Do you need an authentic influencer? What are the key criteria that an influencer needs to have?<br>• How does an influencer help you build your brand's authenticity?<br>• How do you choose the type of branded content the influencer should produce?<br>• How do consumers perceive your branded content?<br>• What actions do consumers take to respond to branded content?<br>• What are the challenges in producing branded content with influencers?<br>• Have you worked with Influencer Marketing agencies before? How do you define their role? |
| **Consumers** | • What makes you trust an influencer?<br>• Is your trust towards influencers contingent on authenticity?<br>• Who is an authentic influencer/authentic brand to you? Please give example for each.<br>• Why are some influencers/ brands more authentic than others?<br>• Would you trust an inauthentic influencer? Can an inauthentic influencer convince you to purchase? Why do you follow inauthentic influencers?<br>• How do you choose which influencers to trust/distrust?<br>• What do you think about the different type of branded content influencers produce? Do you trust one or the other more?<br>• Do you think brands can work with inauthentic influencers? Should they work with inauthentic influencers? What do you think of such content?<br>• Do you think influencers should work with inauthentic brands? Should they work with inauthentic brands? What do you think of such content? |
| **Influencers** | • How do you define an authentic influencer? How do you build up your authenticity as an influencer?<br>• As an influencer, what are your criteria for working with brands and products? |

| | |
|---|---|
| | - How do you choose which brands you work with?<br>- How do you devise the type of branded content to produce?<br>- How important is the authenticity of a brand to you?<br>- How does a brand help you build your authenticity?<br>- Have you worked with inauthentic brands before? If so, why?<br>- What are the challenges of producing branded content?<br>- What motivates you to work with brands?<br>- Have you worked with Influencer Marketing agencies before? How do you define their role? |
| **Influencer Marketing agency** | - What is the process of producing branded content, from the initial brief to debrief? What is your role in the process?<br>- What is the role of an Influencer Marketing agency? What is your role within the company?<br>- What is your opinion on authentic influencers? Can brands / should brands work with inauthentic influencers?<br>- What about brand authenticity? How would you define an authentic brand?<br>- Is it important for both the brand and the influencer to be perceived as authentic? Why?<br>- Do you work with inauthentic brands/ influencers? What is the role of the agency when you work with inauthentic brands and influencers?<br>- As an Influencer Marketing agency, how do you choose influencers for the brands? What are the most important criteria in choosing influencers?<br>- How do you choose the type of branded content the influencer should produce?<br>- Are there any tensions between the brands and the influencers? How do you manage these tensions? |

### *Table CA3*
### *MTurk Questionnaire*

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|---|---|
| Pre-screening question: Do you follow any influencers on social media platforms (such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, Twitch, Snapchat)?<br>(if participants answer no, they cannot proceed to the next questions) | • Yes<br>• No |
| What does 'authenticity' mean to you in the context of influencer marketing? | Open-ended question |
| What would you consider as inauthentic (in the context of influencer marketing) and why? | Open-ended question |
| How would you define an authentic content produced by an influencer? | Open-ended question |
| What makes you trust an influencer and their recommendations? | Open-ended question |
| Would you consider buying a recommended product from an influencer you perceive as authentic? Why? | Open-ended question |
| Would you consider buying a recommended product from an influencer you perceive as inauthentic? Why? | Open-ended question |
| What does 'authenticity' mean to you in the context of a brand? | Open-ended question |
| Would you consider buying a product from an inauthentic brand, and if so, why? | Open-ended question |
| Drawing on your definitions above, can an authentic influencer compensate for the lack of brand authenticity? | Open-ended question |
| Please indicate your age: | • 18-24<br>• 25-34<br>• 35-44<br>• 45-54<br>• 55-64<br>• 65 or above |
| Please indicate your gender: | • Male<br>• Female<br>• Other |
| Please indicate which social media platforms you use regularly: | • TikTok<br>• Instagram<br>• Facebook<br>• Snapchat<br>• YouTube<br>• Twitch<br>• Twitter |
| Please indicate how often you use the selected platforms: | • On a daily basis<br>• A few times a week<br>• On a weekly basis<br>• Few times a month<br>• Monthly basis |

## Section CB: Authenticity

*Table CB1*
*Authenticity Construct in The Marketing Literature*

| **Dimension of Influencer Authenticity** | **Proposed Definition of Dimension** | **Authenticity Construct from the Literature** |
|---|---|---|
| **Expertise** | The extent to which the influencer is perceived as an expert in the given field | ▪ Influencers are perceived as more authentic when they are legitimate content creators (vs. paid promoters). (Kapitan et al. 2021)<br>▪ Lee and Eastin (2021, p. 831) describes this aspect as “being skilled in their field”, “being knowledgeable in their field”, and “demonstrates a natural ability in their field”. |
| **Engagement** | The extent to which the influencer can ‘influence’ their follower base | • Wies, Bleier and Edeling (2022) and Leung et al. (2022) established the importance of followers’ engagement with influencers’ branded content in driving influencer marketing effectiveness. |
| **Integrity** | The extent to which influencers are perceived as being intrinsically motivated, not acting out of their own financial interest, but having the consumers’ best interest at heart | ▪ ‘Passionate influencers’, driven by inner passion and not financial objectives (Audrezet, de Kerviler and Moulard 2020).<br>▪ “Acting in accord with one’s values, preferences and needs versus acting in such a way to please others or obtain rewards” (Kapitan et al. 2022) “Autonomous, self-determining true self” (Kernis and Goldman 2006)<br>▪ “Autonomous, self-determining true self” (Kernis and Goldman 2006) |
| **Originality** | The extent to which the influencer uses storytelling and shares personal experiences, while acting genuinely and promoting brands they genuinely use | ▪ Authenticity as “genuine, reality or truth” (Kennick 1985)<br>▪ Genuine (Van Leeuwen 2001)<br>▪ Sincerity, innocence (Fine 2003)<br>▪ “Natural, honest, simple, unspun” (Boyle 2003)<br>▪ Indexical authenticity: “Real thing”, “true original” (Grayson and Martinec 2004)<br>▪ “Genuine, real and/or true” (Beverland and Farrelly 2010)<br>▪ Sincere (Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink 2008)<br>▪ “True to their self” (Moulard, Garrity and Rice 2014)<br>▪ “Faithful and true towards itself” (Morhart et al. 2015)<br>▪ “Genuine” (Moulard et al. 2016; Napoli et al. 2014)<br>▪ True-to-ideal, true-to-fact-, true-to-self (Moulard et al. 2021) |

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|  |  | ▪ Transparent authenticity” as providing fact-based information and truthful representation (Audrezet, de Kerviler and Moulard 2020)<br>▪ “Open and honest” (Campagna et al. 2021)<br>▪ “Behaving in accordance with his/her true self” (Lindmoser et al. 2022)<br>▪ Produce “content is unique; has distinctive characteristics” (Lee and Eastin 2021: 830<br>▪ “Individuality, uniqueness, differentiation” (Tolson 2001)<br>▪ “Talented, discrete and original” and “rare, uncommon” (Moulard et al. 2015)<br>▪ “Original” and “unique” (Moulard et al. 2016)<br>▪ “Original, unique” (Van Leeuwen 2001)<br>▪ Originality (Fine 2003) |
| **Transparency** | The extent to which influencers are perceived as transparent in how they communicate with the audience, thus sharing the good and the bad of their life and the brands they endorse, and not just perfect or desirable aspects | ▪ Iconic authenticity: The accurate representation of something (Grayson and Martinec 2004) |

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