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Table of Content:

Introduction

Imagine a world in which marginalised voices go to form a symphony, where a single word ignites global movements, and where entire communities question the foundations of established social norms. This is the realm of digital culture, a dynamic fabric stitched together with human expression, innovation, and connectivity. In this context, a hashtag, comment, or like can impact someone's virtual presence as well as their real-life experiences, especially given that both spheres have become equally significant in today's world. Ideas move across continents in milliseconds in our digital world, and millions of people's shared goals and opposition inspire collective activities that take shape (Fuchs, 2017).

In today's interconnected and fast-moving society, the rise of mobile and web technologies, especially with the advent of Web 2.0, has played a pivotal role. These technologies offer dynamic platforms where individuals and communities can share, create together, discuss, and alter content created by users, widely recognized as social media (Kietzmann, et al., 2011). Such platforms have become indispensable, significantly altering societal operations and connecting over half the global population (Kemp, 2022). Furthermore social media platforms, by creating new online social environments and communities, have emerged as the go-to medium for users to engage in any form of discussion and communication, making possible the swift growth and popularity of social media, and consequently the rise to social media influencers who, due to their influential status, find themselves more vulnerable to public scrutiny and the phenomena of cancel culture (Chang et al., 2020; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Cancel culture refers to the practice, often initiated on social media platforms, of ceasing support for individuals or entities in the limelight that have acted or expressed themselves in ways deemed offensive. This practice is typically marked by a surge of public backlash, accumulating negative comments on social media as users voice their discontent with the offender and their actions. Such incidents can result in financial, professional, and personal repercussions not only for those targeted, but in case of brand endorsment by the involved celebrity, also for the brand. Despite being a subject

of intense debate in media circles and a pressing issue of our times, cancel culture, although having predecessors like damnatio memoriae, boycotts, and blacklists, is a relatively new area of study with limited research.

This dissertation revolves around the following research question: *"how does cancel culture influence consumer trust and purchase intention when mediated by a celebrity endorser versus the brand itself?"* is dedicated to examining how cancel culture affects the purchasability of brands by altering consumer trust, with a focus on the differences in this impact when a scandal is mediated through a celebrity endorser versus when it involves only the brand. It seeks to explore the nature and evolution of consumer trust in these contexts, providing a comprehensive understanding of the broader implications of cancel culture and offering valuable insights into how societal reactions to scandals affect consumer decisions.

This work incorporates a methodological approach which utilizes a survey to explore changes in brand trust and purchasability related to a scandal. The participants will be randomly assigned one of two survey versions: one describing a scandal involving a celebrity endorser of a brand, and the other involving only the brand. The data will be collected using the online platform Qualtrics XM, with participants being selected through a convenience sampling method. The survey will be distributed via instant messaging applications and social media networks (Whatsapp, Instagram, X). This method allows for an analysis of consumer perceptions, providing valuable insights into the dynamics of trust and purchasing decisions in the context of cancel culture.

The dissertation unfolds over five chapters, beginning with an overview that situates social media and influencers within an academic context, emphasizing characteristics of celebrity endorcers and social media marketing, and exploring broader themes like user engagement on social media and its economic, political, and societal effects.

The second chapter delves deep into cancel culture, the dissertation's core subject, examining its connections to celebrity culture and the synopticon concept, its various manifestations, and its curational processes. This chapter also looks at how social media influencers respond to cancel culture, concluding with a discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of cancel culture as identified by various scholars.

Chapter three outlines the Theoretical background, defining the view of existing literture on consumer trust and purchase intention, outlining the hypotheses tested by this work, and highlighting the conceptual framework which carries the hypotheses.

The following chapter presents the methodology, detailing the data collection and analysis procedures.

Lastly, chapter 5 is a sum of all the conclusions coming from the findings of the research carried out, including managerial implications, limitation and directions for future research.

Chapter 1 – Influencers

1.1 The Rise of Social Media

Social media, as defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), refers to a suite of internet-based applications that emerge from the ideological and technological advancements of Web 2.0, facilitating the creation and exchange of content generated by users. These platforms have significantly transformed the ways in which individuals interact, communicate, and entertain, enabling users to produce, share, consume, and exchange information within virtual communities.

Web 2.0 marks the evolution of the internet into a space characterized by user collaboration and participation, moving away from a web primarily shaped by developers (Montalvo, 2011). This era is not defined by a specific technological upgrade but rather by key features such as user-focused design, crowdsourcing, collaborative engagement, decentralization of power, dynamic content, and enhanced user experiences (Kulakli, 2014). Constantinides & Fountain (2008) describe Web 2.0 as a conglomerate of open-source, interactive, and user-driven online applications that expand users' experiences, knowledge, and market influence as active participants in both business and social realms. In this context, user-generated content (UGC) is seen as the essence of social media usage (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), encompassing all forms of media content that end-users widely access and publish.

To provide a comprehensive understanding of the diverse functionalities and impacts of social media, it is crucial to unravell social media in its single players and characteristics. The work of prominent researchers in the field, has highlighted different aspects of the elements that define social media platforms, and few are presented in Table 1.

Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010	Six distinct types of social media:
	i. *Collaborative projects*, which allow multiple end-users to create content simultaneously and collaboratively, and thus are the most democratic embodiment of UGC. One example of this is Wikipedia. ii. *Blogs*, the earliest form of social media, which are websites that usually display entries in reverse chronological order, based on their date of creation. iii. *Content communities*, which have as the primary goal sharing media content, from photos (such as Flickr) to PowerPoint presentations (like SlideShare). iv. *Social networking sites*, which allow users to connect by building personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to view their profiles, and exchanging instant messages. Facebook is a social networking site. v. *Virtual game worlds*, which are platforms that simulate a three-dimensional environment where users can appear as personalized avatars and communicate with one another as if they were in real

	life. For examples, World of Warcraft.
	vi. *Virtual social worlds*, which allow users to behave more freely and basically live a virtual life identical to their real life. For example, Second Life.
Kietzmann et al, 2011	Seven fundamental elements of social media:
	1. *Identity,*
	2. *Conversations,*
	3. *Sharing,*
	4. *Presence,*
	5. *Relationships,*
	6. *Reputation,*
	7. *Groups.*
	Elucidating the diverse functionalities of social media platforms and the actors involved in this landscape, demonstrating how each platform may prioritize different elements, such as LinkedIn's focus on identity, relationships, and reputation, versus YouTube's emphasis on sharing, conversations, reputation, and groups.
	i.
Dolan et al., 2015	Categorization of social media content into four primary, overlapping categories:
	i. *Informational content*
	ii. *Entertain content*

	iii. *Remunerative content* iv. *Relational content*
Zhu and Chen, 2015	Classification based on the nature of connections (profile-based vs. content-based) and the customization level of messages distinguishing between the following categories: ii. *Relationship*: Profile based social media services that allow users to connect, reconnect, communicate, and build relationships, such as Facebook or LinkedIn. iii. *Self-Media*: Platforms that are profile based and let users broadcast updates, such as Twitter. iv. *Collaboration*: Content based services where users collaboratively find answers, advice and help one another. Reddit is one example. *Creative outlets*: Content based platform that promotes the sharing of interests, creativity, and hobbies. YouTube fits in this category.

Table 1. Overview of social media characteristics

Social media has profoundly influenced various aspects of society. It has shifted the landscape of information dissemination, challenging the dominance of traditional media outlets like newspapers, radio, and television by enabling direct communication (Civelek, et al., 2016). Napoli (2015, p. 751) notes that news organizations have leveraged social media to amplify their content's reach within the digital media ecosystem. On one hand, for businesses, social media represents a shift towards marketing strategies that are driven by consumer demand rather than traditional advertising push, altering how brands are perceived by the public (Gorry & Westbrook, 2009). On the other hand, for consumers, it offers a platform for immediate learning and feedback about products and companies (Djikmans et al., 2015). However, it also presents challenges, such as the proliferation of misinformation within its "vast sea of facts, assertions, opinions, reviews, ratings, criticisms, speculations and rants" (Gorry & Westbrook, 2009, p. 195), complicating the verification of sources and information authenticity.

The societal and cultural ramifications of these developments are significant. Henry Jenkins (2006) discusses the concept of convergence culture in his work, highlighting the blending of old and new media and the resultant changes in technology, industry, culture, and society. This convergence has led to a media landscape where content flows across various platforms, encouraging audiences to actively seek out entertainment across media boundaries. Jenkins also points to the rise of participatory culture, a shift from passive media consumption to active engagement, facilitated by the advent of Web 2.0, underscoring the democratization of media interaction and creation.

"Initially, the computer offered expanded opportunities for interacting with media content (...) it was relatively easy for media companies to commodify and control what took place. Increasingly, though, the Web has become a site of consumer participation that includes many unauthorized and unanticipated ways of relating to media content" (Jenkins, 2006)

In this book, the author explores the intersection of various media forms, illustrating with examples like "American Idol," which, despite being a television show, has fostered vibrant online communities and fan-generated content, and "The Matrix," a

film trilogy that has inspired fan-made websites, Wikipedia articles, and philosophical analyses. This demonstrates how individuals adept with technology and the media utilize Web 2.0 to expand, critique, or enrich popular culture narratives, including those of democracy itself. "Convergence Culture" elucidates shifts not solely tied to social media or Web 2.0, but pivotal in altering the traditional landscape: moving from content confined to specific mediums to content that flows freely across various channels, highlighting the growing interconnectedness of communication systems, the diversified access to media content, and the increasingly complex relationship between corporate-driven media and grassroots participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006, p. 243).

Economically, it represents a new, efficient organizational model for production, distribution, and management, linked to substantial productivity gains in economies that have embraced these strategies. This transformation is grounded in the widespread adoption of new digital technologies, labor transformation, and organizational networking.

Socially, the concept of hypersociality introduced by Castells reflects a blend of real and virtual life, where technology enhances rather than diminishes sociability. This era sees the rise of networked individualism, a culture where individualism dominates but is complemented by technology-facilitated, self-selected social networks that are adjustable to individual preferences and moods (Castells, 2005, p. 12).

The communication landscape has also been revolutionized, moving away from mass media to a system characterized by customized, fragmented channels. This system, dominated by media chain corporations, supports a more democratized form of communication, enabling direct, horizontal communication networks independent of traditional media and governmental channels, facilitating a new era of self-directed mass communication (Castells, 2005, p. 13).

Political processes have transformed in this context, with politics now deeply intertwined with the public space of communication. The concept of real virtuality, where virtual communication forms the basis of reality, means political opinions and behaviors are increasingly shaped within these communicative spaces, sidelining those not present in these spaces from public discourse (Castells, 2005, p. 14).

However, the rise of algorithmic social media platforms introduces a caveat to the notion of a fully democratized horizontal communication landscape. The overwhelming influx of information has led to the adoption of filtering and ranking mechanisms by platform owners, resulting in a personalized content delivery system. This personalization, while tailoring content to individual preferences, also reintroduces a level of control and power dynamics, favoring platform owners and altering the democratic nature of content distribution (Nikolov et al., 2015).

In conclusion, social media has catalyzed profound economic, social, and political shifts, becoming an integral part of contemporary life and a complex tool for connection, despite its mixed implications. This paper will delve into the phenomena of social media influencers and cancel culture, both products of the social media era.

1.2 Defining Social Media Influencers

As highlighted earlier, the rise of social media has significantly elevated the role of user-generated content as a key source of entertainment. It enables users to engage in discussions and share content across a wide array of topics, leading to the widespread dissemination of personal interests, expertise, and viewpoints. Through regular engagement, users can develop remarkable skills in content creation, including photography, video production, and graphic design, which, coupled with the rapid spread of information via the internet, can lead to the accumulation of a large following and potentially even celebrity status. As these creators attract dedicated followers and gain cultural influence, they may transition into the role of social media influencers (SMI) (Audrezet, 2018), also referred to as digital influencers (Cotter, 2018). This chapter aims to demystify the concept of a social influencer, outlining what qualifies someone as an influencer, their defining traits, and how they can utilize these attributes for commercial advantage through influencer marketing.

Despite the surge in research on social media influencers over the last decade (Chang, et al., 2020), a universally accepted definition remains elusive, making it essential to explore various scholars' perspectives on this term.

Freberg et al., 2011	A novel kind of independent third-party endorser who influences audience attitudes via blogs, tweets, and other social media platforms
Agostino, 2019	An engaged and influential social media user who commands attention and trust from other users
De Veirman et al., 2017	Individuals who have cultivated a substantial network of followers and are regarded as trusted authorities in various niches
Chang et al., 2020	An individual who has created a personal platform with a considerable number of

	engaged followers on social media, capable of influencing their audience.
Marketing perspective	
Ge and Gretzel, 2018	Individuals within a consumer's network who significantly affect consumer behavior.
Campbell and Farrell, 2020	Individuals who post on social media for monetary rewards.
Wong, 2014	A marketing strategy that targets influential individuals to sway potential customers
Kirwan, 2018	Individuals with large social media followings who use their influence to encourage followers to purchase products or services, typically in return for compensation
Strategic communication perspective	
Enke and Borchers, 2019	Third-party entities that have forged significant, quality relationships with organizational stakeholders through content creation, distribution, interaction, and personal presence online.
Abidin, 2015 & 2016	Individuals who share personal habits and lifestyles (typically associated with lifestyle influencers).

Table 2. Social media influencers definition

Furthermore, it's useful to differentiate between related terms within the influencer ecosystem. Internet celebrities, as described by Abidin (2018), achieve fame online, which may or may not translate beyond the internet. Celebrity endorsers are recognized individuals who endorse products in advertisements, not limited to social media. Opinion leaders influence others' decisions and behaviors, a role that SMIs can fulfill, but not all opinion leaders are SMIs. Similarly, "digital content creators" produce content for platforms like YouTube and Facebook, regardless of the level of attention received, highlighting the diverse roles and recognition within the digital and social media landscape.

Echoing the sentiments of previously mentioned definitions, De Veirman (2017) posits that social media influencers, unlike traditional celebrities, are perceived as more approachable, credible, and genuine, making them more relatable to their audience (p. 801). This relatability is key to their success. By sharing unfiltered glimpses into their lives (Abidin & Ots, 2015) and engaging directly with their followers, whether online or face-to-face, influencers foster a sense of authenticity and closeness (De Veirman, 2017). This effect is amplified as influencers' content often features their interactions with friends and family, further diminishing the perceived gap between them and their audience (Usher, 2018). Such practices cultivate what is known as a parasocial relationship, where followers feel a bond with influencers akin to a real-life friendship, despite the interactions being largely one-sided. De Veirman (2017) characterizes this as "the illusion of a face-to-face relationship with a media performer" (p. 801), suggesting it engenders a sense of mutual understanding and connection. Hudders and colleagues (2020, p. 8) concur with this assessment, underscoring the significance of these perceived intimate connections between influencers and their followers:

"The opportunity to interact with followers on social media allows the influencer to build a close bond with his/her followers and be considered a peer rather than a distant celebrity. Influencers attach great importance to the creation of feelings of similarity, familiarity, and likeability (...) as these attractiveness indicators create a sense of parasocial interaction"

Social media plays a significant role in fostering the illusion of direct and unfiltered access to individuals' lives, promoting the idea of reciprocal relationships and thus significantly driving this trend (Usher, 2018). Credibility and expertise are also crucial attributes for SMIs. Djafarova (2019) found that social media users show a preference for influencers who are perceived as genuine and engaging, with 30% of respondents feeling inspired by such influencers and valuing the practical advice they offer. The emphasis on delivering content that is both informative and accurate was also noted. Similarly, Ki et al. (2020) discovered that followers attribute competence to influencers who produce and share knowledgeable content, thus positioning these influencers as authoritative figures in their fields.

Additionally, it's worth noting that a recent study focusing on young consumers in Hong Kong not only corroborated the previously mentioned elements but also introduced new viewpoints:

"From young consumers' perspective, the credibility and trustworthiness of an online influencer and the truthfulness of the information the influencer provides are highly prized qualities (...) Young consumers endorse effective online influencers who are willing to share their genuine life experience and privacy, such as relationship status and weaknesses" (Tsen & Cheng, 2021)

The study also revealed an increasing appreciation among users for influencers' engagement with political matters, highlighting a belief that influencers "ought to voice their stances on diverse social issues and be well-informed politically" (Tsen & Cheng, 2021, para.27). To cultivate these traits and "stand out in the economy of attention" (Ruiz-Gómez, 2019), influencers dedicate efforts to crafting their personal brand or self-branding (Hudders et al., 2020), which involves "creating a unique public persona for economic advantage and/or to accumulate cultural value" (Khamis et al., 2017). Khamis and colleagues (2017, p. 1), further explain that the essence of self-branding lies in establishing a distinctive appeal or identity that resonates with and meets the expectations of their audience, akin to how commercial brands operate. Thus, leveraging these attributes not only enhances how consumers perceive and trust in advertising but also influences brand recognition and the likelihood of purchasing

(Hudders, et al., 2020). Consequently, influencer marketing has become a standard strategy for numerous brands. This approach is described as "the development and execution of marketing tactics and activities through individuals who can sway the purchasing decisions of potential buyers" (Ge & Gretzel, 2018, p. 1277), thereby benefiting both the brand and the influencer's digital persona.

1.3 Celebrity Endorsement and Influencer Marketing

The most enticing and charming among us have always had an impact on the lives that others want to lead, including the goods that people purchase to fulfil their aspirations. However, it is only after the introduction of social media that influencing others has gained official recognition as an actual job.

Celebrity endorsements, often abbreviated as CE, leverage the fame or social influence of celebrities to promote products, brands, or services. This practice dates back to the late 19th century but saw a significant rise in prevalence within advertisements during the 1980s (Charbonneau & Garland, 2010; Jain & Roy, 2016). For more than a hundred years, marketers have utilized celebrities as a strategy to enhance their brand's appeal. Lafferty & Goldsmith (2004) highlight that CEs constitute over 10% of corporate advertising expenditures. Notable examples include Virat Kohli, who reportedly earns $31 million annually from endorsements with companies like Blue Tribe, Puma, and Vivo; Michael Jordan, who made $100 million from his NBA career endorsements, and Venus Williams, who secured a $40 million deal with Reebok. The effectiveness of a CE hinges on the celebrity's top status in their field and their ability to garner consumer trust.

In modern times, celebrities from various professions, including sports and entertainment, are featured in advertisements, lending their symbolic and cultural significance to the products they endorse (Charbonneau & Garland, 2010). This shift has had a profound impact on society and popular culture, further amplified by media exposure. The influence of CEs on brand perception has been magnified with the rise of social media platforms (Keel & Nataraajan, 2012; Lu & Seah, 2018), leading marketers to allocate a substantial part of their advertising budgets to celebrity endorsements. Given the billions spent on CEs annually, the need for comprehensive research is evident (Amos et al., 2008; Batra & Homer, 2004).

Over the last three decades, studies on CEs have explored various aspects, including endorser credibility (Friedman & Friedman, 1979; Goldsmith et al., 2000; Ohanian, 1990), attractiveness (Caballero et al., 1989; Kamins, 1990; Till & Busler, 2000), the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), and the concept of celebrity-product match-up

(Kamins, 1990; Kamins & Gupta, 1994; Till & Busler, 1998). Despite the wealth of research, the literature presents conflicting findings, prompting ongoing efforts to develop an optimal model that explains CE's varied effects.

Existing literature on CE has tried to define this new occupation since its first appearance, and according to McCracken (1989), the first ever to publish a thorough work on CE, a celebrity endorser is an individual who enjoys public recognition and uses this fame to influence consumer products by featuring in their advertisements. The practice of employing celebrities for product promotion accelerated with the advent of television in the late 1960s, as noted by Kaikati (1987), and saw a significant surge in the early 2000s. Historically, advertisers have enlisted individuals well-known in various fields such as business, sports, cinema, or politics to endorse their products. However, it wasn't until 1985 that a formal study aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of different types of celebrities was undertaken (Kahle & Homer, 1985). This period also marked the beginning of intense academic focus on CE, leading to the first detailed review of literature on the subject by Kaikati (1987).

The advantages of using celebrity endorsers can include enhancing the message, building a brand image, and setting a brand apart from its competitors. However, potential disadvantages might involve alienation of wealthy consumers, damage to the brand and its reputation due to the personal issues of the celebrity, the risk of overselling, changing consumer tastes, and the possibility of the brand being overshadowed. Wood & Burkhalter (2014) note that beyond advertising, celebrity endorsements find application in various other communication forms, including nonprofit and NGO efforts like Aamir Khan's promotion of Satyameva Jayate and Yuvraj Singh's support for child education, as well as B2B products and services, exemplified by Tiger Woods' endorsement of Accenture and celebrities promoting their own brands, such as Virat Kohli's One8. It is crucial to recognize that celebrity endorsements are grounded in agreements that allow the business, brand, or product to utilize the celebrity's name and/or likeness in specified manners.

The effectiveness of celebrity endorsements lies in their ability to instantly attract consumers towards a product, regardless of the product itself. According to Friedman et al. (1976), while celebrity endorsements may not significantly impact the product's

price or the veracity of its claims, they do influence product characteristics in a way that stimulates purchase desire.

It has been established through various studies that employing celebrities for endorsements is a validated strategy, explaining why some endorsements succeed and others do not. Numerous research efforts have aimed to identify the ideal characteristics of endorsers for different contexts (e.g., product types) and how these traits work together to enhance advertising effectiveness. Yet, these studies have not led to universal guidelines that marketers can follow when selecting a communication strategy. Notably, there has been a lack of effort to consolidate the findings from extensive literature on CEs into a comprehensive model that addresses inconsistencies and offers marketers an optimal strategy for specific situations (Knoll & Matthes, 2017).

The disagreement on the definition of clear criteria for selecting celebrity endorsers complicates identifying the traits that should align between a celebrity and a brand during the endorsement process, leading to potential challenges and uncertainties in executing effective celebrity endorsement campaigns. Reflecting on 50 years of CE research, Knoll & Matthes (2017) suggested that future studies should delve into the psychological and behavioral foundations to better understand the conditions under which certain factors are effective. Despite that, as per today, research has often focused on assuming that factors such as source credibility (SC), attractiveness, brand fit, and meaning transfer (MTM), best represent the theoretical framework for a successful choice of endorsement, suggesting that celebrities who are credible, attractive, or carry significant meaning are the most impactful on consumers.

Initial psychological studies highlighted trustworthiness and attractiveness as key qualities of effective messengers, and early endorsement research focused on these attributes in celebrity endorsers. Building on the concepts of SC and attractiveness, the matchup hypothesis suggests that the success of an endorsement depends on how well the endorser's image aligns with the product. This alignment affects product evaluation, influenced by the endorser's attractiveness, credibility, and other factors contributing to perceived congruence. Essentially, the effectiveness of an endorsement campaign relies on the compatibility between the endorser's persona and the product's characteristics, which plays a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions and intentions to purchase (Hsu & McDonald, 2002). The MTM also

emphasizes that successful endorsements are those that effectively transfer the endorser's attributes to the product (McCracken, 1989). Research has extensively explored the efficacy of trustworthiness and attractiveness, leading to the proposal of the matchup hypothesis, which considers multiple dimensions such as trustworthiness, likability, credibility, familiarity, congruence, and attractiveness. The majority of studies have provided ample evidence supporting the endorsement model as a viable framework for explaining endorsement theory and identifying credible celebrity endorsers (Seno & Lukas, 2007).

While most endorsement research has been conducted within the theoretical frameworks of source credibility and attractiveness, Zwilling & Fruchter (2013) found that celebrity attractiveness plays a key role in strengthening consumer purchase intentions. Building on that, Winterich et al. (2018) observed that both components of credibility (trustworthiness and expertise) are equally important in determining the impact of celebrity endorsers on attitudes and evaluations. Although SC and source attractiveness (SA) models provide explanations for certain endorsements, they often overlook the multidimensional nature of the endorser. Consequently, some scholars have proposed the matchup hypothesis and SC as more accurate and comprehensive explanations, considering a wider range of factors for a more detailed understanding of celebrity endorsement dynamics and their effects on consumer perceptions and behaviors. Fleck et al. (2012) criticized the matchup hypothesis for its lack of evidence supporting the dimensions under consideration, suggesting that research focusing solely on trustworthiness or congruity is inadequate. McCracken (1989) pointed out that many practical endorsements are not adequately explained by source or matchup models, proposing SC as a more fitting hypothesis. In reality, SC has been recognized as the hypothesis that most accurately captures the essence of the endorsement process (Carroll, 2009; Fleck et al., 2012). While the matchup hypothesis addresses some gaps left by the SC and credibility models, it's clear that these three hypotheses do not fully address key issues in the effective use of CEs, as stated by Erdogan (1999).

1.4 And the Costumers? Consumer trust and purchase intention

Social media engagement reflects the level of interaction from followers, encompassing actions like likes, comments, and clicks on a post, among various behaviors indicating engagement. These behaviors can range from positive to negative and from active to passive. Dolan et al. (2015) conducted a study on online customer-brand interactions and categorized social media engagement behaviors into seven distinct types, from co-creation to co-destruction, the last including all forms of the so called "cancel culture".

Building on the understanding that social media engagement encompasses various interactions, ranging from positive to negative, the role of consumer trust in both the brand and the celebrity endorser becomes even more critical. Trust serves as the foundation of the consumer-brand relationship, influencing how consumers perceive and interact with branded content: when a celebrity endorser is deemed trustworthy, their endorsement can significantly enhance the brand's image and authenticity. This synergy between brand trust and the endorser's credibility can elevate engagement behaviors, driving positive interactions such as likes, comments, and ultimately, purchase intentions. Thus, cultivating consumer trust is essential for brands seeking to leverage social media engagement effectively to boost sales and foster customer loyalty.

Generally speaking, trust has been widely studied over the years, as it is acknowledged as being essential to interactions inside organisations, between people, and between people and organisations. However, scholars rarely agree on concepts related to trust, making it one of the most difficult concepts to understand (Hong & Cho, 2011). In general, trust is defined as a party's readiness to be exposed to another party's actions because they anticipate the other will carry out a specific task that is significant to the trustor, regardless of the other party's capacity for oversight or control (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), trust is essential to effective alliances and is defined as the conviction that the trustee will act in a beneficial manner. Thus, trust is the conviction that neither the trustee nor the trustor will suffer harm or unfavourable outcomes.

Since trading interactions in an online setting are predicated on the impersonal character of the Internet infrastructure, trust becomes an even more crucial issue (Hong and Cha, 2013). In addition to firsthand encounters, a brand's reputation, openness, and the perceived authenticity of its messages all contribute to this online trust. Celebrity endorsers play a crucial role in this dynamic since their perceived sincerity and reliability can impact the represented brand's credibility. The endorsement of a brand by a well-known celebrity can significantly boost consumer confidence and trust in that brand, fortifying levels of trust and decreasing perceived risks associated with making purchases, hence raising the likelihood that a purchase will be made (purchase intention).

The process of making a buying choice for a customer is still difficult: purchase intention and consumer behaviour, attitudes, and perceptions are usually connected and influenceable. To do so, in the context of the internet today, a brand can leverage on connotations in addition to being a name or symbol, all essential tool for creating a positive impression in the eyes of customers. Previous studies that looked at the relationship between customers' purchase intentions and brand equity have shown that there is a significant association between brand equity and the desire to recommend brand purchases to others (Irshad, 2012). Most previous studies that looked at how brand image affected consumers' intentions to buy revealed a significant association between these variables (Arslan & Altuna, 2010; Tariq et al., 2013).

In conclusion, there is a close relationship between the dynamics of customer trust and purchase intention when it comes to social media involvement. Customer behaviour is greatly influenced by trust, which is a fundamental component of both the brand and the celebrity promoting it: a reputable celebrity's endorsement can increase the brand's perceived dependability, which will increase consumer confidence and lower their perception of the risks involved in making purchases. In order to fully utilise social media interaction, brands need to put a high priority on establishing and preserving consumer trust, especially in the highly competitive digital marketplace of today.

Chapter 2 – Cancel Culture

2.1 Defining Cancel Culture

Cancel culture refers to the social phenomenon, often sparked on social media, where there is a collective decision to stop supporting public figures or entities after they have said or done something deemed offensive. This phenomenon is marked by a significant backlash on social media, characterized by a rapid accumulation of comments that call out the offensive behavior and often include performative language aimed at mocking and shaming the individual accused of the misconduct (Chiou, 2020, p. 297).

While the core concept is widely recognized, there is no unanimous agreement on the precise definition of cancel culture. Some authors, such as Beiner (cited in Velasco, 2020) and Anderson-Lopez et al. (2021), emphasize the role of social media in directing negative attention towards the "culprit," whereas others like Clark (2020) and Ng (2020) highlight the aspect of withdrawing support. Moreover, certain definitions do not specify the targets of cancel culture (Velasco 2020; Ng 2020), while others acknowledge that public figures, including celebrities and social media influencers, are particularly susceptible to being cancelled (Chiou, 2020; Clark, 2020). It is also noted that many discussions on cancel culture primarily focus on social media users and often overlook other potential subjects of cancel culture, such as TV series, movies, or brands, which can also be affected by this phenomenon. This oversight is addressed in works like "Tug of War: Social Media, Cancel Culture, and Diversity for Girls and The 100" by Jonina Anderson-Lopez, R.J. Lambert, and Allison Budaj, which explore the broader implications of cancel culture. The table below summarizes the diverse definitions provided by different authors.

Bromwich, 2018	"It is an act of withdrawing from someone whose expression – whether political, artistic, or otherwise – was once welcome or at least tolerated, but no longer is"
Clark, 2020,	""canceling" is an expression of agency, a choice to withdraw one's attention from someone or something whose values, (in)action, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time, and money.""... usually reserved for celebrities, brands, and otherwise out-of-reach figures"
Velasco, 2020	"cancel culture is a form of public shaming initiated on social media to deprive someone of their usual clout or attention with the aim of making public discourse more diffused and less monopolized by those in positions of privilege."
Chiou, 2020	"When a public figure says or does something considered offensive or pejorative to a given group (e.g., ethnic minorities, sexual/gender minorities, people with disabilities, women as minorities, and so forth), disparaging comments quickly pile up on social media, calling out the misconduct, with- drawing support for the person's work/product, or using performative language to mock and shame the person believed to be responsible for the wrongdoing. "
Anderson-Lopez et al., 2021	"cancel culture is a sort of group mentality by which the actions or words shared in a public forum are deemed taboo, and therefore should be amended."
Ng, 2020	""cancel culture," that is, the withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic"
Velasco, 2020	"trying to erase someone from public discourse – either through publicly shaming, deplatforming, or demanding that they be fired"
Urban Dictionary, 2022	"The cancerous notion that a person who does something considered objectionable by most people should have their life ruined."

Table 3. Cancel Culture Definitions

Cancel culture primarily focuses on condemning actions perceived as sexist, homophobic, racist, or otherwise harmful to minorities, according to Ng (2020). It not only highlights behaviors detrimental to these groups but also exerts pressure to retract such actions or statements, as discussed by Anderson-Lopez et al. (2021). It's crucial to distinguish between cancel culture and call-out culture. Call-out culture involves publicly denouncing overt and covert forms of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other bigotries, as defined by Ahmad (2015) and cited by Gerrie (2019). While calling out can be a component of cancel culture, the two are not synonymous. Call-out culture focuses on expressing outrage over wrongful acts without necessarily targeting public figures or brands, nor does it always aim at withdrawing support. Often, call-outs target everyday individuals for perceived moral failings, initiating a wave of public criticism that may serve as a learning opportunity for the offender, as Rabouin et al. (2021) suggest, viewing call-outs as potential warnings for self-correction.

The origins and evolution of these practices trace back to black counter publics, highlighting a history of marginalized voices seeking avenues for expression and accountability, as noted by Clark (2020). The term "cancel" has been part of African American Vernacular English since around 1991, initially appearing in songs and movies, and has roots in queer communities of color, with Black Twitter playing a pivotal role in popularizing the concept of being "cancelled" as a form of internet activism, as described by Ahuja & Kerketta (2021) and Clark (2020). Black Twitter, defined by Graham & Smith (2016), has been instrumental in bringing unique black perspectives to broader discussions, with hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter marking significant activist movements (Pereira de Sá & Alberto, 2021). hese practices are often misrepresented and appropriated by social elites, framing them as a threat to open debate rather than as legitimate expressions of resistance and calls for justice. Pippa Norris further supports this thesis by arguing that the perception of "cancel culture" largely depends on whether an individual's values align with the dominant cultural norms. Her study shows that claims of being "canceled" are often made by those whose views do not align with the prevailing liberal norms in post-industrial societies, and this mismatch creates a sense of being silenced. This perceived silencing, however, is not indicative of an actual widespread suppression of free

speech but rather reflects the dynamics of changing cultural values and the discomfort of those holding minority views within specific contexts (Norris, 2023).

The practice of cancelling, while now sometimes criticized as a path to censorship, began as, and is still considered by many, a form of social media activism. This activism, evolving with technology, extends activists' reach and exposes them to diverse cultures and social issues, as Tucker (2018) points out.

Furthermore, cancel culture has predecessors like blacklisting and boycotting, which, despite their limited scope and effectiveness due to structural power dynamics, share characteristics with modern cancelling practices, as Clark (2020) observes.

> "*Producers and casting directors, for example, have the ability to categorically deny employment in the entertainment industry. Admissions officers, regents, and donors have enjoyed similar influence on college campuses. Even the measured success of Civil Rights era boycotts depended on global media attention to gain traction*" (Clark 2020, p. 2).

When delving into Cancel Culture, it's crucial to consider the dynamics of power that shape it. Cancel Culture can also be understood through the lens of celebrity culture, linked to the concept of the synopticon. Thomas Mathiesen (1997) introduced the term synopticon to describe our "viewer society," where the masses observe a select few, such as celebrities. The advancement of communication technologies has provided the public with continuous access to the lives of celebrities, amplifying the synopticon effect. This constant visibility has made celebrity reporting a significant aspect of contemporary culture, particularly focusing on the missteps, scandals, and falls from grace of public figures. The rise of social media has enabled celebrities to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, allowing them to communicate directly with their audience without needing a publicist's approval (Tucker, 2018). Tucker states that social media exposes synoptic values transparently, contrasting with the traditional media's role as an intermediary between celebrities and the public (Velasco, 2020).

This direct communication channel has given the audience the power to monitor and critique celebrities' every statement, leading to public call-outs and loss of support for comments that contradict their public persona, the phenomenon known as Cancel Culture. Velasco (2020) points out that this immediate connection between celebrities

and the public leaves no room to maneuver or gracefully handle scandals, a task that was considerably more manageable before the advent of social media. From the perspective of celebrities, Cancel Culture represents a crisis in their relationship with their fans, which, given the nature of social media, where fans contribute value through their engagement and content creation without compensation, Cancel Culture disrupts this implicit agreement between celebrities and their audience (Pereira de Sá & Alberto, 2021).

Cancel culture has become a focal point of debate, often criticized as a threat to free speech while simultaneously hailed as a necessary tool for social justice. As seen in the analysis of existing literure on the topic, at its core, cancel culture seeks to hold individuals accountable for actions and statements that are deemed harmful to marginalized groups. However, this practice is often conflated with call-out culture, hence involving publicly denouncing discriminatory behavior but does not necessarily aim to withdraw support or ostracize individuals. That means that despite its noble beginnings, cancel culture is frequently misappropriated by social elites, who frame it as a menace to open debate and free speech: this misrepresentation shifts the focus from the legitimate grievances of marginalized groups to a broader societal fear of censorship and silencing.

Pippa Norris's research sheds light on the perception of cancel culture, arguing that the feeling of being "canceled" often stems from a misalignment between an individual's values and the dominant cultural norms. In liberal societies, those with conservative views may feel marginalized and silenced, interpreting the pushback against their views as a form of cancellation. However, this sense of silencing is more indicative of changing cultural values and the resulting discomfort for those whose views are no longer mainstream, rather than an actual suppression of free speech.

Furthermore, the criticism of cancel culture as a path to censorship overlooks its roots as a form of social media activism that has evolved to address new social issues and dynamics of power. Cancel culture shares characteristics with historical practices like ostracism, excommunication, blacklisting, and boycotting, which also aimed to hold powerful individuals accountable but were limited by structural power dynamics, but, the contemporary digital landscape, however, amplifies these practices, extending their reach and impact.

In summary, cancel culture, while often portrayed as a threat to free speech, is a far more complex and multifaceted phenomenon rooted in legitimate calls for accountability and justice from marginalized communities. Its impact is shaped by the dynamics of power, cultural alignment, and the evolving nature of digital activism. Understanding these nuances is essential for a balanced perspective on the practice and its implications in contemporary society.

2.3 The Various Manifestations of Cancel Culture

Cancel Culture extends beyond merely ceasing support for someone: it encompasses a comprehensive process that ranges from negative online comments to actively undermining anything associated with the perceived offender. This section delves into the various activities linked with cancel culture.

The moment a public figure makes a controversial statement or action, social media becomes awash with immediate backlash, highlighting the wrongdoing. These call-outs, a critical component of cancel culture, aim not just to identify the offense in reaction to a specific prejudiced act but also tend to escalate into more hostile exchanges (Chiou, 2020). Such interactions can lead to public humiliation, often referred to online as "dragging," where the criticism extends beyond the act to the individual and their defenders. Velasco (2020) notes the risk of backlash against those offering the criticized figure a chance for redemption. The ability to rally around a particular issue, often overlooked by mainstream media, can propel the matter to viral status, thus attracting mainstream media and news attention to the issue (Clark, 2020). Part of the backlash includes unfollowing or unsubscribing from the offender's social media, serving both as a form of punishment and distancing, with significant economic repercussions (Lawson, 2020). For instance, on YouTube, fewer subscribers mean reduced viewership and, consequently, diminished AdSense revenue. Similarly, on any platform, a drop in followers results in less engagement, diminishing the individual's or company's appeal to potential business and brand partnerships (Lawson, 2020).

As the controversy unfolds, efforts to deplatform the offender and boycott related entities intensify (Velasco, 2020). This often includes impacting any projects, products, or collaborators associated with them.
Another tactic employed is doxing, where personal or sensitive information is maliciously published online, posing serious risks to both the target and the perpetrator, given its legal implications (Clark, 2020; Snyder et al., 2017). The overarching aim behind these actions is often to remove the individual from public discourse entirely, achieved by pressuring all related parties to disassociate from the offender (Velasco, 2020).

2.4 The curating process of Cancel Culture and Influencers responses

In the face of scandals and the ensuing cancel culture, influencers and brands often attempt to mitigate the fallout or correct their errors. However, efforts to address these issues sometimes backfire, leading to increased criticism. This section will explore various reactions of influencers and brands to cancel culture, drawing on examples from Lawson's (2020) research.

A tactic frequently employed by influencers is to offer apologies via Instagram Stories. This feature, which displays content for only 24 hours without a public comment section, renders such apologies transient and unable to leave a lasting mark or even address the core issue that prompted the backlash. Moreover, these apologies often appear buried under numerous other posts, requiring users to navigate through many stories before reaching the apology itself.

Lawson (2020) also discusses instances where influencers attempt to alter the narrative surrounding their mistake. For example, a YouTuber called out for racist tweets tried to mitigate the situation by claiming she had merely retweeted, rather than authored, the offensive content. This attempt to deflect responsibility and deny the racism only served to alienate her audience further, as such gestures are perceived as disingenuous and motivated more by damage control than by genuine concern for the affected parties or the issue.

To limit the visibility of negative feedback, influencers sometimes leverage platform features that allow them to disable comments and likes or filter comments. This can be a double-edged sword: while it may temporarily reduce the visibility of the controversy, it also impacts the content's engagement and, by extension, its visibility and relevance on the platform due to the algorithms that prioritize interaction. Furthermore, restricting discussion on one platform often simply shifts the conversation elsewhere, diluting the influencer's control over the narrative and potentially exacerbating the situation.

These examples underscore the delicate balance influencers must navigate between managing crises effectively and maintaining authenticity and sensitivity towards social

issues. Failure to strike this balance can result in strategies that not only fail to quell the backlash but may even amplify it through attempts at evasion and suppression of dialogue.

A common critique is the ambiguity surrounding the criteria for cancellation, as noted by Velasco (2020). The unpredictable nature of cancel culture makes it challenging to foresee what actions will provoke public backlash. In this optic, the route to redemption is often unclear and, in many cases, non-existent, with a tendency to focus on punishment rather than on encouraging meaningful change (Velasco, 2020; Clark, 2020). Ng (2020) points out that platforms like Twitter contribute to this issue with their inherent encouragement of ideological rigidity and a lack of nuanced understanding, exacerbated by the brevity of posts, the speed of dissemination, and the quickfire nature of online interactions.

Tucker (2018) discusses call-out culture, criticizing its tendency to stifle meaningful dialogue by prematurely labeling individuals before a thorough discussion can take place. This dynamic fosters a culture where punitive measures are preferred over opportunities for rehabilitation. The rapid nature of social media judgments often categorizes public figures as either "bad" or "good" instantly, leaving no space for nuanced understanding or personal growth (Tucker, 2018; Ahuja & Kerketta, 2021). Tucker (2018) uses the case of Zoe Sugg, a well-known British YouTuber, who faced criticism over tweets from 2009 deemed offensive, leading to her being hastily branded as "classist" and "homophobic". Despite evidence to the contrary, these isolated tweets cast a long shadow over her character. Another important reflection made by Tucker (2018) argues that cancel culture has deviated from its original goal of educating on offensive behaviors, morphing into a "counter-productive technology of surveillance" focused more on punishment than on fostering an environment conducive to learning and growth.

Regarding the nature and severity of the consequences faced by those targeted, the outcomes are often ambiguous and disproportionately severe (Clark, 2020). It's not uncommon for individuals who have made a single controversial post years ago to receive the same level of backlash as those with a history of serious offenses like sexual harassment (Ng, 2020). This discrepancy leads many to question if the intensity

of the public backlash is always justified by the severity of the initial wrongdoing (Bouvier, 2020, p. 1).

The debate around Cancel Culture also touches on concerns that it may be quashing free speech and encouraging a culture of self-censorship and oversentitivity among individuals wary of facing public condemnation (Velasco, 2020; Cook et al., 2021). An example of this concern was highlighted in June 2020 when Harper's Bazaar published a "Letter on Justice and Open Debate," co-signed by notable figures including Gloria Steinem, Margaret Atwood, and J.K. Rowling. The letter aimed to address the perceived climate of intolerance for differing viewpoints.

"The free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted. While we have come to expect this on the radical right, censoriousness is also spreading more widely in our culture: an intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty" (Ackerman et al., 2020)

The concern that Cancel Culture restricts the exchange of diverse viewpoints, potentially transforming into a "toxic internet mechanism that inhibits individuals from sharing and debating their differing opinions," is becoming increasingly shared and worrying, as many are starting to speak of "ideological cleansing" (Velasco, 2020). An example that underscores these concerns involves Addison Rae, a TikTok influencer who faced criticism for merely introducing herself to former U.S. President Donald Trump, as reported by the New York Post (2021). This act alone led to assumptions about her political leanings and resulted in calls for her cancellation.

The phenomenon of social media echo chambers exacerbates the issue, where individuals are exposed primarily to viewpoints that echo their own, leading to a reluctance to engage with or even acknowledge dissenting perspectives. This is often a result of users curating their social media feeds to include only content that aligns with their beliefs, while excluding or unfollowing sources that present conflicting views (Velasco, 2020; Ahuja & Kerketta, 2021). Velasco (2020) notes that as people's views

become more aligned with those they interact with online, it grows increasingly difficult to entertain ideas that diverge from the prevailing ideological stance. Moreover, social media platforms like Twitter tend to create insular networks of users with similar opinions, although it's also noted that these platforms have the potential to host a wide array of disparate and unrelated ideas (Bouvier, 2020).

Cancel Culture has been critiqued for resembling a form of spectacle, described by Bouvier (2020; 2021) as a "performative spectacle of ritual blood-letting," where the primary aim appears to be the moral gratification of those calling out, rather than addressing serious issues. This perspective suggests that the act of calling someone out can serve as a means of self-promotion, offering users the opportunity to showcase their moral superiority or wit. Ahmad (2015) echoes this sentiment, pointing out the performative nature of public call-outs, where individuals can display their political purity or cleverness. In a recent research examining Twitter's role in racism-related call-outs, Bouvier (2020) observed that such discussions often shift focus away from the broader issue, instead isolating and scrutinizing individual actions, demontrating that the actual scope of Cancel Culture might be starting to lose itself.

Conversely, many still view Cancel Culture as a crucial form of digital protest or a "last-ditch appeal for justice" (Clark, 2020, p. 2) and an avenue for online activism (Chiou, 2020). It's seen as a challenge to systemic injustices, aiming to shed light on various forms of inequality rather than targeting individuals per se. Clark (2020, p. 3) emphasizes how social media empowers countless individuals to unite and demand accountability from influential figures swiftly and effectively. She acknowledges critiques regarding the confrontational nature of call-outs but contends that the pressing need to address oppression justifies the urgency and directness of these actions. Both Meredith Clark and Lisa Nakamura view Cancel Culture as a potent form of exerting influence and enacting a "cultural boycott" (Velasco, 2020, p. 4), suggesting that calling out immoral actions publicly tends to induce a sense of shame in the wrongdoer, potentially leading to positive change (Clark, 2020).

Cancel Culture also amplifies the voices of marginalized communities, offering them visibility and recognition often denied in other contexts (Rabouin, 2021). Natalie Pang of the National University of Singapore notes that this shift allows previously

overlooked voices to be heard, challenging the discourse traditionally dominated by those in power (Velasco, 2020, p. 4). Despite some reservations about Cancel Culture, its capacity for rapid, widespread mobilization against perceived injustices, has been proven to empower marginalized groups (Ng, 2020). This is exemplified by the case of beauty influencer James Charles, who faced allegations of inappropriate interactions with minors. The accusers utilized social media to bring their stories to light, a platform they might not have had otherwise. As a result, Charles faced significant repercussions, including being dropped from the second season of the YouTube series "Instant Influencer" (Tenbarge, 2021), highlighting the tangible impact of Cancel Culture, even as the legal outcomes remain uncertain.

Anderson-Lopez and colleagues (2020) present an alternative view to the notion that cancel culture equates to censorship, arguing instead that it embodies the essence of free speech. Discussing the impact of cancel culture on television series, they note, "social media users exercised their first amendment rights and responded, and showrunners made a business decision" (Anderson-Lopez, 2020), suggesting that the feedback can be constructive, enabling showrunners to adapt and retain their viewership. Anderson-Lopez further clarifies that expressing disapproval does not equate to stifling speech, stating "an expression of dislike does not necessarily translate to suppression" (Anderson-Lopez, 2020). Additionally, Rabouin and colleagues (2021) observe that often those who are "cancelled" and subsequently feel a loss of influence are quick to criticize cancel culture's negative impacts and portray themselves as victims, using this as a tactic to deflect any criticism from the media and public.

The varied perspectives offered by these authors underscore the ongoing debate about cancel culture's role: whether it serves as an effective and necessary means to address online misconduct, merely restricts open dialogue and the exchange of diverse viewpoints, or is fundamentally valuable but requires significant reform.

2.5 Crisis Communication and Social Media

Social media serves as an effective tool for real-time communication and engaging in a dialogue that involves both the sender and receiver. In crisis situations, it becomes a pivotal channel for disseminating and exchanging information about individuals, products/services, or organizations in a manner akin to word-of-mouth, offering an informal pathway for information flow (Austin et al., 2018). The impact of social media on organizations during crises is twofold. While it can lead to issues that are more volatile, escalate rapidly, and spread faster than those encountered offline, it also provides the opportunity for organizations to respond swiftly and engage directly with their audience during a crisis (Austin et al., 2018). Roshan et al. (2016, p. 350) point out a significant advantage of social media: it enables organizations to directly address stakeholders' queries and concerns, thereby potentially improving their understanding of stakeholders' needs during a crisis, clarifying issues, and maintaining or even boosting their reputation.

Recent studies in communication have begun to emphasize that the way information is presented can be as crucial, if not more so, than the response to the crisis itself. Among these is the social mediated crisis communication (SMCC) model by Jin and Liu (2010), originally introduced as the blog mediated crisis communication (BMCC). This framework outlines the interactions between an organization facing a crisis and three distinct groups of publics who generate and consume information before, during, and after a crisis (Austin et al., 2012). It illustrates that a crisis can originate and spread not only through various online social media platforms but also via offline social interactions. The SMCC model (Austin et al., 2012) identifies three categories of publics:

i. *Influential social media creators*, who disseminate crisis information to others;
ii. *Social media followers*, who consume the social media creator's information;
iii. *Social media inactives*, who "consume influential social media creators' crisis information indirectly through word-of-mouth communication with social media followers and/or traditional media who follow influential social media creators and/or social media followers" (Austin et al., 2012).

The model further elucidates the manner in which information is disseminated through social media, both directly and indirectly, as illustrated in figure 1. It incorporates five key elements that influence organizational responses to crises: the source of the crisis, the type of crisis, the organizational structure, and both the content and delivery method of messages. The source of a crisis can be internal, such as financial mismanagement, or external. This distinction affects how blame is assigned and, as a result, the range of responses an organization might consider. The nature of the crisis (whether it is perceived as a victim situation, an accident, or intentional) influences organizational reactions, as outlined in the situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2015). The structure of the organization determines if the response should be unified across the organization or tailored by specific branches. The messages' content and how they are presented are crucial for providing support to those impacted, helping the public understand the crisis, and determining the medium through which the message is shared (whether through social or traditional media) (Jin & Liu, 2010; Jin et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2012).

This framework illustrates the pathways through which information circulates both within and outside an organization, traversing various media and interpersonal networks. It highlights five factors that shape how an organization communicates during a crisis. Subsequent research in social media crisis communication emphasizes the importance of focusing on stakeholders, advocating for a thorough understanding of their perspectives and needs prior to deciding on a crisis response strategy (Cheng, 2018).
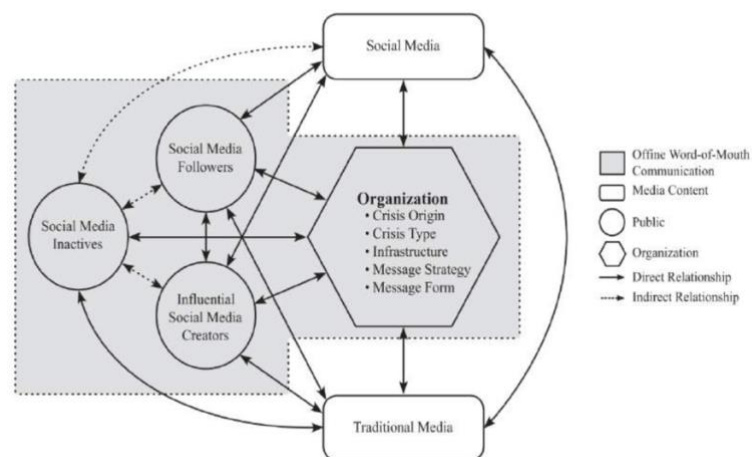

Figure 1: Social mediated crisi communication model by Lui et al (2012).

In addition to specific communication frameworks, numerous empirical studies offer guidance for organizations navigating crisis situations. Roshan et al. (2016) highlight that organizations experiencing accidental crises, as categorized by Coombs (2015), encounter stakeholder backlash if they fail to issue an apology, except in situations deemed as challenges. In these instances, some stakeholders may resist apologies, particularly those who believe the organization was not at fault. This variance in stakeholder perception often leads organizations to opt for silence in such scenarios (Roshan et al., 2016). The study also advocates for the adoption of rebuilding strategies over denial or minimization tactics in the context of social media. Given the fast-paced nature of social platforms, employing rebuilding strategies is deemed more effective for mitigating reputational damage. Furthermore, the research indicates that stakeholders tend to be more forgiving of crises stemming from external factors, unless they perceive the organization's response to managing the crisis as delayed.

Roshan and colleagues (2016) also observe that organizations primarily use social networks for updates rather than engaging with public inquiries, thus not fully leveraging the capabilities of these platforms to support crisis communication. They note the detrimental effect of excessively internalizing information on an organization's reputation. Additionally, the study points out that organizational responses to stakeholder inquiries on social media often "may lack humanness" (Roshan et al., 2016, p. 358), missing a crucial element of effective communication.

This aspect of "humanness," particularly the expression of emotions, is central to the research conducted by Van der Meer and Verhoeven (2014). They argue that the communication of emotions not only conveys information about the sender, as per Frijda & Mesquita (1994), but also directly influences the public's assessment of corporate reputation. Moreover, the way emotions are communicated can significantly impact how the public perceives and responds to an organization's crisis management efforts (Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014, p. 527). Thus, the expression of emotions plays a vital role in determining the effectiveness of crisis response strategies.

Given these insights, it becomes clear that the nuanced application of emotional intelligence and strategic communication in social media plays a pivotal role in crisis management. Organizations must navigate the delicate balance between

transparency and empathy to harness the full potential of social media platforms, thereby enhancing their reputation and stakeholder relationships in times of crisis. This approach not only mitigates immediate reputational damage but also fosters long-term trust and loyalty, underscoring the importance of integrating "humanness" into digital crisis communication strategies.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Background

4.1 Literature Review

In the evolving landscape of digital communication, the relationship among cancel culture, consumer trust, and purchase intention has emerged as a key field of research. This chapter explores the theoretical foundation for these ideas and offers a literature analysis that looks at how cancel culture affects consumer attitudes and actions, delving into the extant literature on these associations and delineates the three principal hypotheses of this work. The objective is to enhance comprehension of these interrelated events and their consequences for marketing tactics in the digital era by means of this theoretical framework.

The research question, "How does cancel culture influence consumer trust and purchase intention when mediated by a celebrity endorser versus the brand itself?" was the criterion for the selection and organization of the literature reviewed in this chapter. Hence, the selection of literature focused on articles that examined the connection between cancel culture and its effect on purchase intention, specifically through the mediating factor of consumer trust. The reviewed articles were chosen based on their relevance to these key variables: cancel culture, consumer trust, and purchase intention. Each study provided insights into how these elements interact, particularly in the context of scandals involving either celebrity endorsers or the brands themselves.

The articles included in the review addressed various dimensions of this relationship. The first paragraph will be addressing how existing studied have described the relations between This focus ensured a comprehensive understanding of how trust mediates the relationship between cancel culture and consumer behavior, providing a robust theoretical foundation for the hypotheses tested in this work.

H1. Cancel Culutre and Purchase Intention

The first hypothesis of this work posits that cancel culture directed towards a brand by itself has a smaller effect on a customer's purchase intention than cancel culture mediated by a celebrity endorser connected to that brand. To support this hypothesis, the literature review provides a comprehensive foundation by examining the concepts of political consumerism, brand avoidance, and the impacts of cancel culture.

Previous literaure highlights the significant role of the so called *political consumerism* in shaping purchase intentions. According to the Edelman (2018) survey, 64% of worldwide consumers make purchasing decisions based on a brand's stance on social or political issues. This behavior reflects the meaning behind political consumerism, defined as the dynamic where consumers either boycott or reward brands based on ethical, political, or social reasons (Clark, 2020; Copeland, 2014; Copeland & Boulianne, 2020; Hong & Li, 2021; Klein et al., 2004; Wei & Bunjun, 2020). This concept directly relates to the hypothesis by suggesting that consumers' purchase intentions are influenced by their perceptions of a brand's ideological alignment, which is a core aspect of cancel culture.

Research also focuses on avoidance and boycotts are central to understanding the effects of cancel culture on purchase intention. Yuksel, Thai, and Lee (2020) define a boycott as an anti-consumption act where consumers withdraw from a brand due to perceived misconduct. Unlike brand hatred, which stems from punitive discontent, brand avoidance is driven by a conscious decision to reject a brand that does not align with personal beliefs (Friedman, 1985; Odoom et al., 2019; Yuksel, 2013; Yuksel & Mryteza, 2009). This distinction is crucial as it underscores the negative and dissatisfied state of mind that leads to brand avoidance, a likely outcome of cancel culture incidents.

The literature review further discusses cancel culture as a phenomenon particularly prevalent in response to ideological and political issues. Brand avoidance can occur without firsthand product experience, particularly during cancel culture episodes when consumers' ideological or political convictions clash with a brand's values (Yuksel et al., 2020). This highlights the potential for significant changes in purchase intentions

based on cancel culture, aligning with the hypothesis that cancel culture mediated by a celebrity endorser may have a more substantial impact.

While the literature review does not explicitly cover the mediating role of celebrity endorsers, the hypothesis suggests that their involvement can amplify the effects of cancel culture. Celebrity endorsers often have a significant influence on consumer perceptions and can either mitigate or exacerbate the impact of cancel culture on purchase intentions. The hypothesis implies that cancel culture involving a celebrity endorser connected to a brand can lead to stronger negative consumer reactions, thereby reducing purchase intentions more than cancel culture directed at the brand alone.

In conclusion, the literature review provides a robust foundation for the hypothesis by detailing the mechanisms of political consumerism, brand avoidance, and the impact of cancel culture on purchase intentions. By linking these concepts, the hypothesis gains credibility, suggesting that cancel culture involving celebrity endorsers has a more pronounced effect on purchase intentions than cancel culture targeting the brand itself.

H2. Cancel Culture and Consumer Trust

The number of scholarly research addressing various facets of online relationships has greatly expanded as a result of the rising popularity of social media networks. The scope of previous literure extends from long-term customer-brand connections to brand crises and controversies. However, articles that examine the correlation between a scandalous event and consumer trust are non existent. This work aims at filling this litereture gap by analysing how consumer trust is influenced by cancel culture events. Building on what has been said about the first hypothesis, in contrast to cancel culture mediated by a celebrity brand endorser, the second hypothesis of the thesis suggests that cancel culture that exclusively targets the brand has a less significant effect on customer trust.

H3. Consumer trust and Purchase Intention

The literature highlights the intricate relationship between perceived risk, consumer trust, and purchase intention, primarily within the domain of online transactions. It underscores the foundational work of scholars like Pavlou (2003), who identified technological and behavioral uncertainties as major sources of perceived risk, affecting consumer trust and purchase intention. Additionally, research by Hong and Cho (2011), Pavlou and Gefen (2004), and Verhagen et al. (2006) established consumer trust as a key mediator between perceived risk and purchase intention, noting both direct and indirect effects on purchasability of a product.

While these studies offer valuable insights into the dynamics of online consumer behavior, they predominantly focus on trust in relation to purchase transaction risks. This thesis, on the other hand, aims to expand the scope by examining the influence of a brand's perceived image on consumer trust and subsequent purchase intentions, specifically within the context of cancel culture. This is an underexplored area, highlighting a gap in the literature concerning the impact of brand image on consumer trust and purchase intention amidst cancel culture scenarios.

Based on this literature review, the third hypothesis posits that consumer trust, significantly influenced by a brand's perceived image, plays a crucial role in determining purchase intention, especially in the context of cancel culture. This hypothesis aligns with the existing body of research that emphasizes the importance of consumer trust in shaping purchase intentions. However, it uniquely contributes by focusing on how a brand's image, particularly in the face of cancel culture, affects this trust-purchase intention dynamic, thus addressing the identified gap in the literature.

Conceptual Framework

The main objective of this experimental study is to investigate how different types of cancel culture (mediated by a celebrity endorser and not mediated by a celebrity endorser) influence purchase intention in the fashion sector. To test this relationship, it was decided to complete the conceptual framework through the indirect effect represented by the mediation factor of consumer trust, generated by the type of cancel culture. Following this assumption, it was decided to develop a research model using consumer trust as a mediation factor, an independent variable related to the type of cancel culture, and a dependent variable concerning purchase intention.

Therefore, for the development of this conceptual framework, Andrew F. Hayes' Model 4 was adopted. The framework is characterized by the presence of an independent variable (X), a dependent variable (Y), and a mediator (M) (Figure 3).
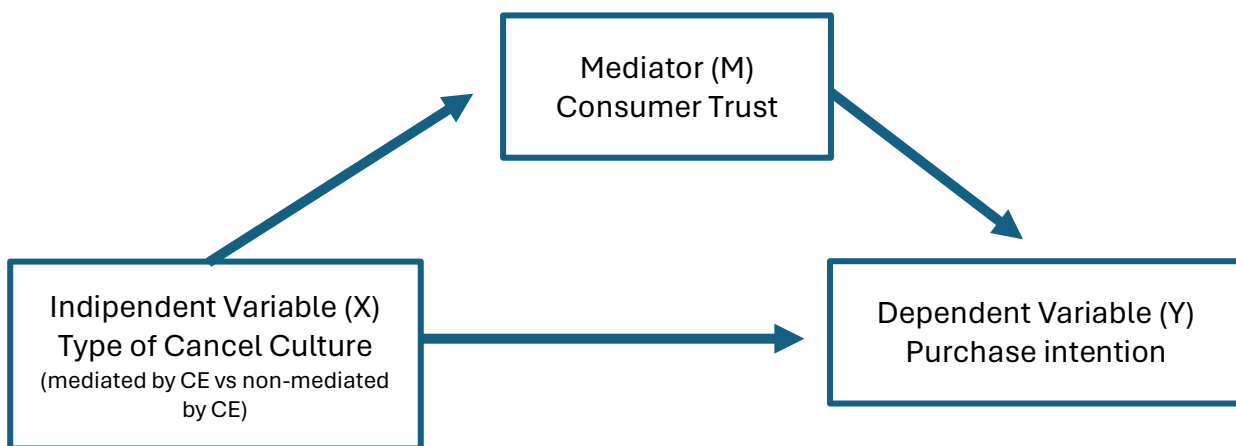

Figure 3. Conceptual Framework.

Chapter 4: Experimental Research

4.1 Methodological Approach

4.1.1 Methodology and Study

This experimental study consists of a 2x1 between-subjects causal conclusive research design. The results of the experiment are represented by responses to a questionnaire obtained through a self-administered survey conducted in Italy during May 2024 using the online platform Qualtrics XM. Specifically, the survey participants were selected using a non-probability sampling methodology. In particular, it was decided to use a convenience sampling method, thereby leveraging both the ease and speed of access and selection of elements from the target population. Indeed, this technique involves no economic cost and is advantageous in terms of high-speed data collection and a high response rate. Moreover, the convenience sampling method was instrumental in ensuring a high participation rate, as it reduced barriers to entry for respondents. This approach also enabled us to collect preliminary insights rapidly, which is valuable for exploratory research stages and can inform future, more comprehensive studies. While recognizing the limitations regarding the representativeness and generalizability of the findings, the convenience sample provided a pragmatic solution that aligned with the study's objectives and resource constraints.

Considering the target sample, it was decided to include respondents of all age groups, collecting data from both male and female individuals, as it was not expected that demographic variables would significantly influence the results of the experimental research.

4.1.2 Participants and Sampling Procedure

The survey was distributed to 210 individuals, of which 200 respondents fully participated in the experimental study, answering all the questions in the questionnaire completely and exhaustively. The remaining 10 incomplete responses were initially selected and then discarded from the dataset during the data cleaning procedure. Respondents were contacted via an anonymous link generated by the Qualtrics XM online platform and subsequently sent through instant messaging applications and social media networks as the main distribution channels (WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook). The target population sample reached by the survey primarily included university students, graduates, and newly employed individuals located in various cities across Italy. Therefore, following this assumption, the average age of the respondents was 25.29 years, although the age range varied from a maximum of 57 years to a minimum of 15 years.

Regarding the gender of the respondents, the predominant gender in the sample was female, represented by 60.5% (121/200), while the male gender was characterized by 33.0% (66/200). The remaining 6.5% (13/200) of respondents preferred not to identify with a specific gender (3.5%; 7/200) or selected the option of the third gender/non-binary (3.0%; 6/200).

4.1.3 Data Collection and Questionnaire Composition

To conduct the experimental study, it was necessary to develop a questionnaire composed of 8 questions, of which 6 specific and 2 demographics.

The demo questions that were asked were the following:

- Indicate your gender.
    - Male
    - Female
    - Non-binary/Third gender
    - Rather not say
- Indicate you age. (open question)

The 6 specific question were divided in two matrices, one aimed at recording consumer trust, and the other purchase intention.

The first three questions, related to consumer trust (mediator) were borrowd by a scale derived from the pre-validated scale by Soh, Hyeonjin, Leonard N. Reid, and Karen Whitehill King (2009), "Measuring Trust in Advertising: Development and Validation of the ADTRUST Scale," Journal of Advertising, 38 (2), 83-103. he ADTRUST scale has been widely recognized for its robust psychometric properties and its ability to effectively measure trust in advertising.

These were the statements inserted in a matrix with a 7-point Likert scale (completely disagree to completely agree):

- The brand seems honest.
- The brand seems reliable.
- The brand seems credible.

The second three questions, related to purchase intention (dependent variable) were borrowd by a scale derived from the pre-validated scale by Dodds, W. B., Monroe, K. B., & Grewal, D. (1991). Effects of price, brand, and store information on buyers' product evaluations. Journal of Marketing Research, 28(3), 307-319. This scale is renowkned and well-regarded for its empirical support and has been frequently used in marketing research to gauge the likelihood of purchase behavior.

These were the statements inserted in a matrix with a 7-point Likert scale (completely disagree to completely agree):

- The likelihood of purchasing a product from this brand is:
- The probability that I would consider buying a product from this brand is:
- My willingness to buying a product from this brand is:

Both scales were adapted based on the needs of the experimental research.

To manipulate the independent variable (Cancel Culture: Endorser vs. Brand), it was crucial to create two distinct visual stimuli:

- The first scenario consists of an image of an online newspaper featuring a scandal involving a brand (Appendix b.).
- The second scenario consists of an image of an online newspaper featuring a scandal involving an endorser (Appendix c.).

As mentioned earlier, the data were collected through a questionnaire, which is divided into four main parts. At the beginning of the questionnaire, a brief introduction was provided along with an explanation of the academic purpose of the experimental research. Additionally, after including the university credentials, full and complete compliance with privacy regulations regarding the anonymity policy related to data collection and management was assured.

The second part of the survey is represented by a randomized block composed of the two distinct scenarios. Specifically, the randomization process was essential within the questionnaire structure to obtain a uniform number of exposures to both visual stimuli.

3.1 Results of the experiment

3.1.1 Data analysis

The data collected through the questionnaire provided by the survey generated on Qualtrics XM were exported to the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) statistical software for analysis.

Initially, it was decided to conduct two exploratory factor analyses to examine and validate the items of the scales used in the conceptual model of the experimental research. Specifically, a principal component analysis was performed as the extraction method, applying Varimax as the rotation technique. To decide how many factors to extract, the total explained variance table was observed, verifying that, according to Kaiser's rule, the eigenvalues were greater than 1 and the cumulative variance in % was above 60%. Furthermore, the communality table and the component matrix were observed. Specifically, all items had an extraction value above 0.5 and a holding score greater than 0.3. Therefore, it was decided to retain all items that make up the scales, thus validating them.

After validating both scales, two reliability tests were conducted to verify the reliability level of the scales under consideration. In particular, the Cronbach alpha value of both constructs was observed, ensuring it was above 60% ($\alpha > 0.6$). For the mediator scale, a value of 0.944 was found, while for the dependent variable scale, a value of 0.951 was recorded. Therefore, both scales were found to be reliable.

Additionally, the KMO test for sampling adequacy was performed. For the mediator scale, a value of 0.759 was found, while for the dependent variable scale, a value of 0.775 was recorded. Therefore, in both cases, the level of adequacy was found to be more than adequate (>0.6). Subsequently, the Bartlett's sphericity test was conducted, which was statistically significant with a p-value of 0.001 (p-value$<\alpha = 0.05$).

3.2 Results of the hypotheses

After conducting both factor analyses and reliability tests, the main hypotheses of the conceptual model of the experimental research were examined to confirm or reject their statistical significance, hence, their relative success.

<u>**H1**</u>

To verify the statistical significance of the direct hypothesis (H1), a mean comparison was conducted using a One-Way ANOVA to test the effect of the independent variable (type of cancel culture: not mediated by a celebrity endorser vs. mediated by a celebrity) on the dependent variable (purchase intention). Specifically, the independent variable (X) is nominal categorical and is divided into 2 different conditions coded as 0 (cancel culture mediated by a celebrity endorser) and 1 (cancel culture not mediated by a celebrity endorser), while the dependent variable (Y) has a continuous metric measure.

After performing the ANOVA and observing the descriptive statistics table, it was possible to see that the group of respondents exposed to the scenario coded as 0 (99 people) had an average of 1.6599, while those exposed to the visual condition coded as 1 (101 people) recorded an average value of 3.5182. Furthermore, considering the ANOVA table, a p-value for the F-test of 0.001 was found, which was statistically significant (p-value<α = 0.05). Therefore, it was possible to observe a statistically significant difference between the group means, thus confirming the effect of X on Y. Hence, the direct hypothesis H1 (main effect) was demonstrated.

<u>**H2-H3**</u>

To verify the statistical significance of the indirect hypothesis (H2 H3), a regression analysis was conducted using model 4 of the SPSS Process Macro extension version 4.2 developed by Andrew F. Hayes to test the mediation effect caused by trust on the relationship between the independent variable (type of cancel culture: not mediated by a celebrity endorser vs. mediated by a celebrity) and the dependent variable (purchase intention). To verify the success of the mediation effect, it was necessary to

distinguish it into 2 different relationships: a first effect between the independent variable and the mediator (H2) and a second effect between the mediator and the dependent variable (H3). Specifically, to demonstrate the statistical significance of both sections of the hypotheses, a confidence interval of 95% with a reference value α of 5% was adopted. Moreover, it was necessary to ensure that the extremes of the confidence range (LLCI = Lower Level of Confidence Interval; ULCI = Upper Level of Confidence Interval) for each hypothesis respected the sign agreement (both positive or both negative), so that 0 was not included in the previously mentioned range. Finally, to evaluate the sign and magnitude of each effect, the β coefficients of the regression analysis for both relationships of the variables were examined.

H2.
Regarding the first part of the indirect effect, through the observation of the SPSS output, it was possible to note a p-value of 0.0000, a favorable confidence interval (LLCI = 1.7859; ULCI= 2.2450), and a positive β regression coefficient of 2.0155. Therefore, this section of the indirect effect was statistically significant, thus confirming hypothesis H2.

H3
Regarding the second part of the indirect effect, through the observation of the SPSS output, it was possible to note a p-value of 0.0000, a favorable confidence interval (LLCI = 0.7785; ULCI= 0.9938), and a positive β regression coefficient of 0.8861. Therefore, this section of the indirect effect was statistically significant, thus confirming hypothesis H3.

In light of the results obtained, since both sections of the indirect effect were statistically significant, it was possible to declare the overall success of the mediation analysis (indirect effect). Specifically, considering also the non statistical significance of the direct effect contained within the regression analysis, it was possible to ascertain the existence of a pure mediation.

Chapter 5: General Discussion and Conclusions

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

The ever-changing world of modern marketing demands a sophisticated grasp of customer behaviour and the many facets that shape it. This chapter explores the theoretical contributions of the research, starting from the findings and looking at the important intersections between consumer trust, purchase intention, and the ubiquitous influence of cancel culture.

Examining how celebrity endorsements and consumer behaviour interact, especially in the context of cancel culture, has produced a noteworthy theoretical contribution. The findings indicate that customers tend to perceive the linked brand as less reliable when a scandal is mediated via a celebrity endorser, negatively affecting their perception of the brand far more than when the scandal only involves the brand. Customers often form stronger emotional attachments with individual superstars than they do with faceless, anonymous organisations, which lends credence to this argument. In other words, when a celebrity supports a brand, it humanises the brand's persona, values, and ethos, which helps the customer relate to and personalise the brand. Consequently, any incident involving the celebrity is likely to elicit stronger emotional reactions from customers/fans, such as sentiments of moral dilemma or betrayal, which has the potential to fundamentally change how fans feel about and behave towards the brand.

Conversely, in a situation where a brand is the centre of cancel culture, the lack of a personal touch could lead to customers seeing the brand as more impartial and objective. Instead of emotionally responding to the brand's actions, they might weigh the advantages and disadvantages of staying a client in light of factors like product availability, pricing, and quality. Moreover, companies often possess more tools and strategies at their disposal to manage crises and minimise negative publicity, while individuals in the public eye may find it challenging to repair damage to their reputation. The proven hypothesis therefore argues that when a celebrity endorses a brand, the impact of cancel culture is amplified, and customers' disapproval of the celebrity's

actions spills over onto the brand, resulting in a more pronounced fall in purchase intention.

Building on this discussion, it is crucial to analyse the way that interactions between consumers and brands and celebrities vary as the factor which makes them differ. While consumer trust in brands is developed through time by consistent product quality, service, and corporate responsibility, consumers less often have the same emotional attachment to businesses as they do to celebrities endorsing them, meaning that they might be more understanding of a brand and see their mistakes as chances for growth and change.

In contrast, as the public face of the company, celebrities serve as spokespeople for its ethos and values. A controversy or problem has a more severe and immediate impact on consumer trust because of the intimate bond and emotional tie that fans have with the celebrity, seriously undermining people's trust in the celebrity and the business they represent. Consumers would believe that the brand is complicit in the endorser's actions, which would be detrimental to the company's reputation for morality and discernment.

Celebrity scandals also usually spark more intense and prolonged public discourse and media coverage, which increases the issue's duration in the public eye and worsens its negative consequences on the brand. Social media amplifies this effect by rapidly eroding customer trust through publicly disseminated opinions and viral content. Because of the emotional and personal links that fans have with celebrities, cancel culture with a celebrity sponsor essentially has even worse results than when the brand is the only target, whereas when a celebrity is involved, the effects of cancel culture are magnified and the fall in customer trust and buy intention is more marked.

Trust is a foundational element in the relationship between consumers and brands, significantly influencing consumers' willingness to engage in repeat purchases and recommend the brand to others: when consumers trust a brand, they are more likely to overlook occasional mishaps, believe in the brand's promises, and remain loyal even in competitive markets. This trust is usually built in first-person through consistent positive experiences, transparency, and perceived alignment of values between the brand and the consumer.

Consumer trust acts as a mediator in a cosnumer's decision-making process, affecting how they interpret information about the brand and its products or services. High levels of trust can buffer against negative information, such as a minor scandal or negative review, reducing its impact on purchase intention. Conversely, low trust levels can amplify the effects of negative information, leading to a sharp decline in purchase intention.

Moreover, trust is closely linked to perceived risk. When consumers trust a brand, they feel more secure in their purchase decisions, perceiving less risk in terms of product performance, financial investment, and social approval. This sense of security enhances their purchase intention, as they feel confident that the brand will meet their expectations and deliver value.

In the context of cancel culture, the role of trust becomes even more pronounced. A brand with high consumer trust may better withstand the negative impacts of cancel culture, as consumers are more inclined to give the brand the benefit of the doubt and wait for its response before making a final judgment. On the other hand, a brand with low consumer trust may find that cancel culture significantly diminishes purchase intention, as consumers are quicker to believe and act on negative information.

Therefore, this analysis highlights the essential role of consumer trust in driving purchase intention. It emphasizes that maintaining and enhancing consumer trust should be a strategic priority for brands, as it not only fosters customer loyalty but also provides a critical defense against the adverse effects of cancel culture and other reputational challenges. This theoretical contribution underscores the importance of consumer trust in sustaining brand resilience and long-term success.

5.2 Managerial Implications

The findings of this thesis have significant managerial implications, particularly for marketing strategies within the fashion industry. At a microeconomic level, understanding that cancel culture mediated by a celebrity endorser has a more negative impact on consumer perception than cancel culture targeting the brand alone can inform more effective brand management and marketing practices.

The marketing funnel, which includes stages such as awareness, consideration, and decision, places this research in the middle funnel stage where consumers are evaluating and considering their purchase options. In this context, managers can leverage the insights from this study to enhance their middle funnel strategies by carefully selecting and managing celebrity endorsements. Given the heightened sensitivity and potential for negative fallout, brands should implement rigorous vetting processes for celebrity endorsers to ensure alignment with brand values and mitigate risks.

From a practical standpoint, using this information can help increase physical mass and word-of-mouth (WOM) recommendations. By ensuring that the brand's values are consistently represented by trustworthy and well-regarded celebrities, managers can foster stronger consumer trust and loyalty. This can lead to higher sales and revenue, as positive consumer perceptions drive purchase intentions. Furthermore, by proactively addressing potential issues related to celebrity endorsements and maintaining transparent communication with consumers, brands can better navigate the challenges posed by cancel culture. This approach not only protects the brand's reputation but also strengthens its position in the competitive market, ultimately contributing to sustainable growth and success.

In conclusion, the research highlights the critical importance of managing celebrity endorsements with care and strategic foresight. By doing so, brands can enhance their resilience to cancel culture's negative effects, ensuring continued consumer trust and strong purchase intentions.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

Limitations are viewed as the constraints encountered during the writing of this thesis. In this paragraph, the flaws of the study will be examined and future research directions will be given to address these gaps.

One significant limitation of this study is the age range of the subjects involved. Despite respondents from a broad age range were registered, the use of a celebrity endorser is more likely to resonate with younger generations, who are typically more engaged with social media and celebrity culture. This demographic bias suggests that the findings of this study may not be fully representative of the broader population, excluding older generation which react and interact differently with online content. Future research should aim to target younger audiences more specifically or conduct comparative studies across different age groups to gain a more nuanced understanding of how cancel culture impacts purchase intentions across the entire consumer spectrum.

Another limitation relates to the gender of the celebrity endorser presented in the simulus of the survey used in the study, who was male. This choice could have influenced the results, as the impact of cancel culture for female respondants might differ when a female endorser is involved. It would be beneficial for future research to include parallel experiments using both male and female endorsers to examine potential gender differences in consumer reactions. Such studies could provide deeper insights into the dynamics of cancel culture and its varying effects based on the gender of the celebrity endorser.

The study's language also presents a limitation. The data and managerial implications were based on the Italian national context, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings. Conducting the research in English could have expanded the sample base, allowing for broader application of the managerial implications beyond a local context to an international or even global scale. By analyzing consumer behavior in a more diverse linguistic and cultural setting, future research could yield insights that are more widely applicable, encompassing a variety of ethnicities and cultural backgrounds.

Closely related to the language limitation is the cultural context of the study. By focusing exclusively on Italian consumers, the research excludes other cultural perspectives that might influence consumer behavior differently. Cancel culture and its effects can vary significantly across different cultures due to varying social norms and values. Future studies should consider a comparative approach, analyzing how cancel culture affects consumer trust and purchase intention in different cultural settings. This would enhance the understanding of global consumer behavior and provide more comprehensive insights for international marketing strategies.

Furthermore, the scope of celebrity influence considered in this study was primarily limited to social media and entertainment figures. However, celebrities from other fields such as politics, sports, and business can also have significant influence over consumer behavior. Future research could explore the impact of cancel culture on purchase intentions when different types of celebrities are involved. This would help determine whether the findings of this study are consistent across various domains of celebrity influence or if there are unique differences that should be accounted for.

Finally, one notable limitation of this study is related to the methodology used. The study employed a quantitative approach through surveys, which involves collecting numerical data. This method offers the advantage of being time-efficient and allows for the analysis of large sample sizes, however, it also has significant drawbacks, primarily its lack of depth in data analysis. Overall, quantitative methods may fail to capture the nuanced thoughts and feelings of consumers, which are critical in understanding the full impact of cancel culture.

In contrast, qualitative methods such as focus groups or one-on-one interviews provide a higher level of detail and insight into consumer behavior and attitudes, allowing researchers to explore the underlying motivations and emotions driving consumer responses, offering a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena. This methods was not employed in this stdy because it was conisdered time-consuming and often require smaller sample sizes, which can limit their generalizability.

The traditional survey method used in this study does not leave much room for understanding the deeper cognitive and emotional processes of consumers. An

innovative approach that could address this limitation is neuromarketing, which uses techniques like eye tracking, galvanic skin response (GSR), and electroencephalography (EEG) to measure physiological and neural responses to external stimuli. Eye tracking can map visual attention and engagement, GSR measures changes in skin conductance as an indicator of emotional arousal, and EEG records brain activity to understand cognitive responses. These techniques can provide more precise and detailed insights into consumer reactions, helping to overcome the limitations of traditional survey methods by offering a deeper understanding of the subconscious factors influencing consumer behavior.

5.4 Appendix a.

Descriptive Statistics: Age

Statistics

Indica qui la tua età.

N	Valid	200
	Missing	0
Mean		25.2900
Median		24.0000
Mode		25.00
Std. Deviation		5.77431
Variance		33.343
Range		42.00
Minimum		15.00
Maximum		57.00

Indica qui la tua età.
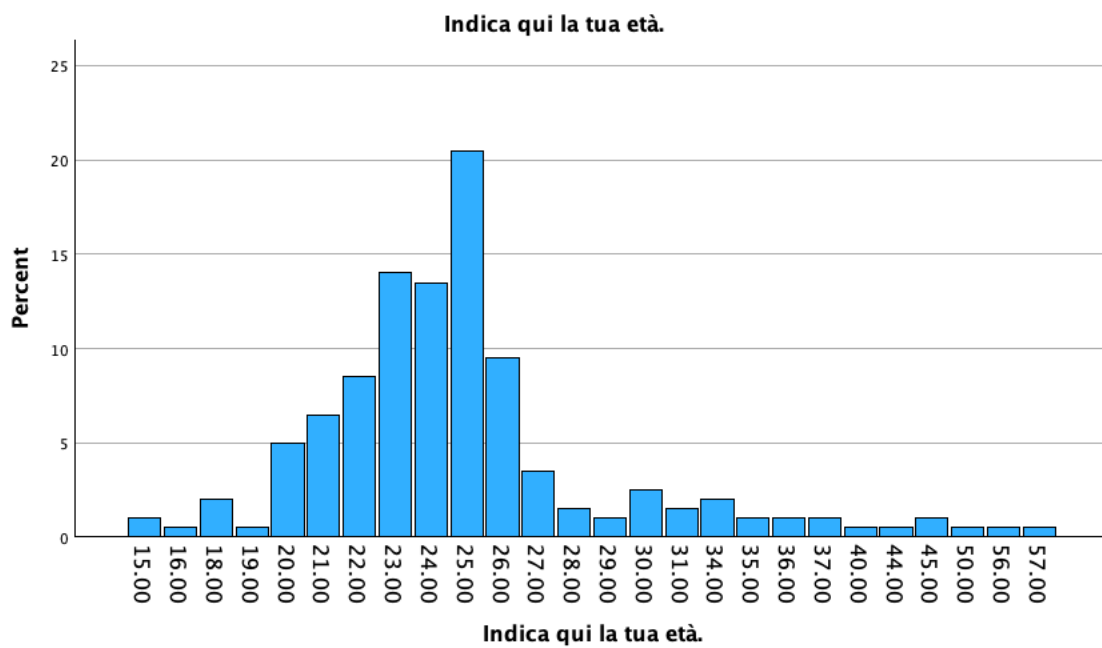
Descriptive Statistics: Gender

Indica qui il tuo genere.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Maschio	66	33.0	33.0	33.0
	Femmina	121	60.5	60.5	93.5
	Genere non-binario / Terzo genere	6	3.0	3.0	96.5
	Preferisco non dirlo	7	3.5	3.5	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

Indica qui il tuo genere.

- ■ Maschio
- ■ Femmina
- ■ Genere non-binario / Terzo genere
- ■ Preferisco non dirlo
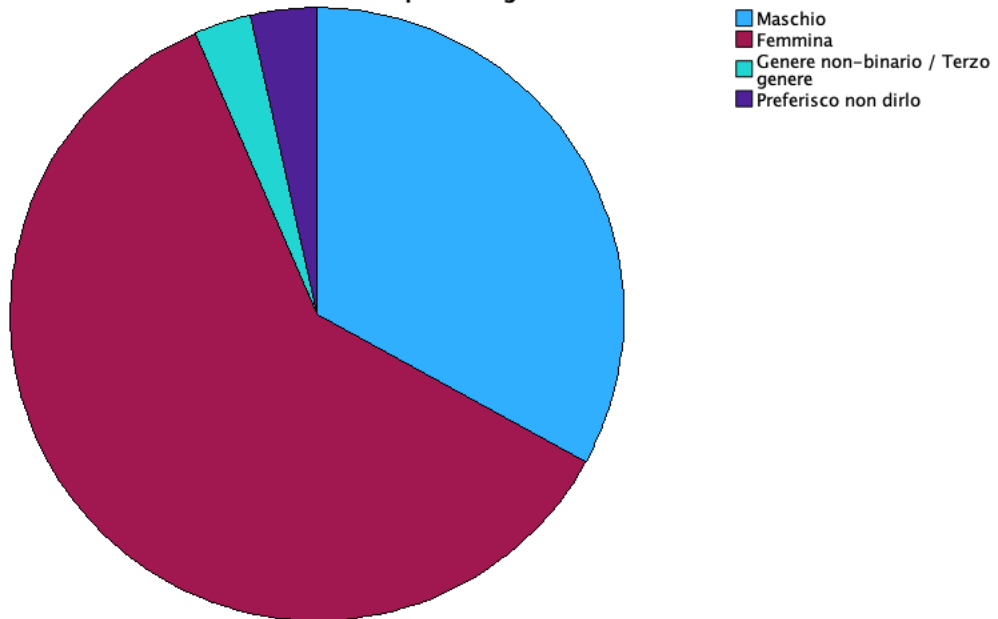
Factor Analysis: Mediator

Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2.701	90.046	90.046	2.701	90.046	90.046
2	.188	6.257	96.303			
3	.111	3.697	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Communalities

	Initial	Extraction
Indicare su una scala da 1 (completamente in disaccordo) a 7 (completamente d' accordo) in quale misura sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni. – Il brand in questione mi sembra onesto.	1.000	.879
Indicare su una scala da 1 (completamente in disaccordo) a 7 (completamente d' accordo) in quale misura sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni. – Il brand in question mi sembra affidabile.	1.000	.925
Indicare su una scala da 1 (completamente in disaccordo) a 7 (completamente d' accordo) in quale misura sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni. – Il brand in questione mi sembra credibile.	1.000	.898

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Component Matrix[a]

	Component 1
Indicare su una scala da 1 (completamente in disaccordo) a 7 (completamente d' accordo) in quale misura sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni. – Il brand in questione mi sembra onesto.	.937
Indicare su una scala da 1 (completamente in disaccordo) a 7 (completamente d' accordo) in quale misura sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni. – Il brand in question mi sembra affidabile.	.962
Indicare su una scala da 1 (completamente in disaccordo) a 7 (completamente d' accordo) in quale misura sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni. – Il brand in questione mi sembra credibile.	.947

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. 1 components extracted.

KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.759
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi–Square	567.463
	df	3
	Sig.	<.001

Reliability Analysis: Mediator

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.944	.945	3

Factor Analysis: Dependent Variable

Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2.732	91.059	91.059	2.732	91.059	91.059
2	.148	4.948	96.007			
3	.120	3.993	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Communalities

	Initial	Extraction
Indicare su una scala da 1 (completamente in disaccordo) a 7 (completamente d'accordo) in quale misura sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni. – La probabilità che io acquisti un prodotto del brand in questione è alta:	1.000	.917
Indicare su una scala da 1 (completamente in disaccordo) a 7 (completamente d'accordo) in quale misura sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni. – La probabilità che io prenda in considerazione l'acquisto di uno prodotto del brand in questione è alta:	1.000	.901
Indicare su una scala da 1 (completamente in disaccordo) a 7 (completamente d'accordo) in quale misura sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni. – La mia inclinazione ad acquistare un prodotto del brand in questione è alta:	1.000	.914

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Component Matrix[a]

	Component 1
Indicare su una scala da 1 (completamente in disaccordo) a 7 (completamente d'accordo) in quale misura sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni. – La probabilità che io acquisti un prodotto del brand in questione è alta:	.958
Indicare su una scala da 1 (completamente in disaccordo) a 7 (completamente d'accordo) in quale misura sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni. – La probabilità che io prenda in considerazione l'acquisto di uno prodotto del brand in questione è alta:	.949
Indicare su una scala da 1 (completamente in disaccordo) a 7 (completamente d'accordo) in quale misura sei d'accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni. – La mia inclinazione ad acquistare un prodotto del brand in questione è alta:	.956

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. 1 components extracted.

KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.775
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	596.351
	df	3
	Sig.	<.001

Reliability Analysis: Dependent Variable

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.951	.951	3

One way ANOVA

Descriptives

DV

					95% Confidence Interval for Mean			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Minimum	Maximum
.00	99	1.6599	.98513	.09901	1.4635	1.8564	1.00	6.00
1.00	101	3.5182	.94337	.09387	3.3319	3.7044	1.00	6.00
Total	200	2.5983	1.33889	.09467	2.4116	2.7850	1.00	6.00

ANOVA

DV

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	172.632	1	172.632	185.665	<.001
Within Groups	184.101	198	.930		
Total	356.733	199			

Regression Analysis: Model 4

```
**********************************************************************
Model  : 4
    Y  : DV
    X  : IV
    M  : MED

Sample
Size:  200

**********************************************************************
OUTCOME VARIABLE:
 MED

Model Summary
          R        R-sq        MSE          F         df1         df2           p
      .7760       .6022      .6776    299.7302      1.0000    198.0000       .0000

Model
             coeff         se          t          p        LLCI        ULCI
constant    1.5522      .0827    18.7624      .0000      1.3890      1.7153
IV          2.0155      .1164    17.3127      .0000      1.7859      2.2450

**********************************************************************
OUTCOME VARIABLE:
 DV

Model Summary
          R        R-sq        MSE          F         df1         df2           p
      .8827       .7792      .3998    347.6813      2.0000    197.0000       .0000

Model
             coeff         se          t          p        LLCI        ULCI
constant     .2845      .1059     2.6859      .0079       .0756       .4933
IV           .0722      .1418      .5094      .6111      -.2074       .3518
MED          .8861      .0546    16.2335      .0000       .7785       .9938


***************** DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y ****************

Direct effect of X on Y
     Effect         se          t          p        LLCI        ULCI
      .0722      .1418      .5094      .6111      -.2074       .3518

Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:
        Effect     BootSE    BootLLCI    BootULCI
MED     1.7860      .1704      1.4446      2.1095

******************** ANALYSIS NOTES AND ERRORS ***********************

Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output:
  95.0000

Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals:
  5000

------ END MATRIX ------
```

NON FARE LO SFIGATO   **VESTI URBAN HEARTS**

Foto di una campagna pubblicitaria del brand Urban Hearts che raffigura un ragazzo nero preso di mira da un gruppo di ragazzi bianchi a causa del suo abbigliamento. Dopo la campagna, il brand è stato accusato di promuovere ideali razzisti e ha subito un'onda mediatica negativa.

5.6 Appendix c.: Stimulus 2

Sulla sinistra una foto del rapper X Eazy promotore di una campagna del brand Urban Hearts.
Sulla destra dei tweet di X Eazy nei quali il rapper promuove ideali razzisti e per i quali ha subito un'onda mediatica negativa.

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