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Amplifying (or buffering) the blow: How influencer signals shape brand cancellation outcomes

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Abstract

Purpose – Brand cancellations are a form of consumer resistance, whereby consumers collectively withdraw support from brands perceived to have committed irreparable transgressions. While existing research focuses on brand cancellations in general, far less is known about how social media influencers shape their trajectory and impact. Drawing on both signalling theory and perceptions of influence and asymmetry, this paper aims to explore the role influencers play in either amplifying or buffering brand cancellation outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – Across three experimental studies, the study examines the consequences of brand cancellations on key brand outcomes (trust, credibility, attitude, purchase intention, word-of-mouth and intention to participate in a cancellation), and the influence of social media influencers in shaping consumer responses.

Findings – Study 1 shows that influencer amplification of a cancellation call significantly worsens brand attitude, credibility, trust, purchase intention, word-of-mouth intention and heightens anger compared to buffering. Study 2 confirms these effects go beyond the cancellation event itself, with amplification exacerbating negative outcomes relative to a no-influencer control and buffering improving evaluations and lowering cancellation participation. Study 3 tests whether these effects generalise to peers, finding that amplification effects are stronger when delivered by influencers, who more severely undermine credibility, trust, purchase intentions and spur participation. Collectively, these studies highlight influencers' unique role in shaping cancellation outcomes.

Research limitations/implications – While the use of fictitious brand scenarios enhances internal validity, future research could extend these findings by examining real-world cancellations and tracking consumer behaviour over time. Further work examining different influencer types, social media platforms and relationship dynamics would enrich understanding. These directions present valuable opportunities to deepen knowledge of how influencer communication shapes consumer responses in brand crises and to refine strategies for managing reputational risk in digital contexts.

Practical implications – The research highlights the reputational risks posed by influencer amplification and underscores the value of proactive influencer engagement and crisis management strategies.



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Originality/value – This study offers both theoretical and empirical contributions by linking brand cancellation to social media influencer signalling, advancing understanding of the social dynamics underpinning cancellation, and demonstrating the strategic importance of influencer communication.

Keywords Brand cancellation, Cancel culture, Social media influencers, Signalling theory, Consumer resistance

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The prevalence of cancellations, particularly those targeting brands, has become so widespread that the phenomenon is frequently, and pejoratively, referred to as cancel culture, and more recently as corporate cancel culture (Scheinbaum and Poehlman, 2024). Consumers increasingly leverage social media platforms to withdraw support from brands they perceive as violating prevailing societal norms - a process now widely referred to as brand cancellation (Demsar *et al.*, 2023; Saldanha *et al.*, 2022). While some view brand cancellation as a mechanism for accountability, others caution that it may stifle expression and heighten reputational risks for brands. From a marketing perspective, brand cancellations are a manifestation of broader consumer resistance behaviours such as brand hate (Curina *et al.*, 2021), boycotts (Yuksel *et al.*, 2020) and anti-brand activism (Brandão and Popoli, 2022).

The growing phenomenon of brand cancellation is particularly pronounced among Millennials and Gen Z, who use digital platforms not only to express disapproval, but to persuade and mobilise like-minded others to take collective action. We define brand cancellation as a collective withdrawal of consumer support on social media from brands perceived to have engaged in objectionable behaviour, typically in retribution for an irreparable transgression (Demsar *et al.*, 2023; Saldanha *et al.*, 2022). Despite these efforts, brand cancellation attempts rarely succeed in eliminating a brand altogether, as illustrated by numerous cases such as L'Oréal's brief removal and subsequent reinstatement of a transgender model following public backlash and a cancellation attempt (Aviles, 2020). Although often short-lived, some cancellations have enduring effects, as seen in the rebranding of Aunt Jemima or the sustained ostracism of prominent public figures such as R. Kelly and Harvey Weinstein (Jungjohann, 2021; Kantor and Twohey, 2022; Valinsky, 2020).

Whilst brand cancellations are often characterised as grassroots consumer movements, the involvement of social media influencers introduces a theoretically meaningful yet underexplored signalling mechanism. Influencers or individuals who cultivate large, engaged followings on social media, are widely perceived as credible and authentic voices who can reinforce, reframe or contest the legitimacy of brand transgressions and associated calls for cancellation. We argue that influencers' responses to cancellations function as market signals that either amplify or buffer the reputational harm caused by a cancellation attempt. Building on signalling theory (Spence, 1973), we conceptualise influencer messaging as observable cues that reduce information asymmetry surrounding the moral meaning of a brand transgression and shape collective action. This perspective extends signalling theory by shifting analytical focus from brands as the primary signallers to influencers as third-party signallers who can stabilise or destabilise brand meaning in digital environments.

Understanding how influencer involvement shapes the trajectory and impact of brand cancellations is critical for both scholars and practitioners. The case of Bud Light offers a striking example. In 2023, the brand - traditionally associated with a conservative consumer base - became the target of a widespread cancellation campaign following its collaboration

with transgender influencer Dylan Mulvaney. The backlash, fuelled by a widely shared video from musician Kid Rock and amplified by conservative commentators and public figures, escalated rapidly into a full-scale commercial crisis. Estimates indicate that the controversy contributed to over US\$1.4bn in lost US sales and approximately US\$27bn in lost market value for Anheuser-Busch (Park, 2024; Ziady, 2024). The fallout extended to retail environments, where Bud Light lost up to 7.5% of its shelf space in major US retailers, demonstrating the breadth and persistence of the damage (Park, 2024).

A comparable case unfolded in 2025 when Tesla experienced intense public backlash following CEO Elon Musk's increasingly polarising political commentary and endorsement of far-right figures, including public support for Donald Trump. These developments sparked global consumer protests, widespread calls for boycotts and a sharp decline in both brand favourability and sales. By early 2025, Tesla's global deliveries had dropped by 13%, and the company's market value halved compared to its 2024 peak (Milmo and Jollu, 2025; Condon, 2025). Together, these cases illustrate that brand crises are no longer confined to product or service failures but are increasingly driven by influencer signalling, leader identity and digitally mobilised consumer resistance.

This paper makes two primary contributions. First, we extend signalling theory by modelling influencer responses as third-party signals that shape collective consumer interpretations of a brand transgression, demonstrating that signalling processes can originate outside the firm. Second, we introduce the notion of asymmetric influence to describe how influencers' reach, and credibility allow them to disproportionately shape the trajectory of brand cancellations, amplifying or buffering reputational outcomes in ways not captured by boycott or brand-hate research. Practically, our work offers managers insight into how to engage (or strategically disengage) influencer voices to mitigate reputational damage during cancellation episodes.

To address this gap, our study draws on signalling theory (Spence, 1973) to examine how influencer responses - whether amplifying or buffering - affect consumer evaluations and behavioural intentions during brand cancellation events. We also test whether these effects differ when the same message is attributed to a peer (an everyday consumer) rather than an influencer, offering novel insight into source effects in the context of brand cancellation. By merging influencer marketing research with the emerging literature on brand cancellation, we move beyond traditional spokesperson endorsement studies and conceptualise influencers as cultural intermediaries who can escalate or diffuse brand crises through their signalling.

To structure our investigation, we first review the relevant literature on brand cancellations and influencer communication to develop hypotheses. We then present three experimental studies: Study 1 tests the baseline effects of brand cancellation on key brand outcomes; Study 2 examines the influence of amplifying versus buffering responses from influencers; and Study 3 isolates the role of source identity by comparing influencer and peer effects. We conclude with a discussion of theoretical contributions, managerial implications and avenues for future research.

Conceptual overview

In the anti-consumption literature (c.f., Lee, 2022), consumer resistance is defined as "resistance against a culture of consumption and the marketing of mass-produced meanings" (Penaloza and Price, 1993). This body of work examines how consumers respond to dominant marketplace structures and actors, particularly when those actions generate dissonance or negative emotions (Roux, 2007). Typically framed as targeted opposition (Roux and Izberk-Bilgin, 2018), resistance aims to challenge or reshape the meaning,

legitimacy and power of products, brands, marketing systems and even consumerism itself (Gabriel and Lang, 2015; Holt, 2002). Resistance occurs along a continuum from passive, avoidant or introspective behaviours to active, adversarial and even aggressive actions (Chatzidakis and Lee, 2013; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004). Passive forms can include frugality, voluntary simplification, market escape and sustainable consumption (Cherrier, 2010; Kozinets, 2002; Black and Cherrier, 2010), whereas active resistance can involve negative word-of-mouth, sabotage, retaliation, collaborative brand attacks and boycotts (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004; Kähr *et al.*, 2016). More recently, online resistance has been classified into typologies such as brandjacking, negative review writing, justice-seeking complaints and firestorming (Lievonon, Bowden, and Luoma-aho, 2023). Active resistance often manifests as consumer movements – collective efforts to challenge and transform dominant consumption practices or brands (Izberk-Bilgin, 2010) – which pressure firms to change policies by articulating shared grievances, mobilising participation and building collective identity (Goodwin and Jasper, 2003). These movements use symbolic public performances to attract attention (Jasper, 2008), from protests and blockades to pranks and stunts (Weijs, Martin, and Arnould, 2018), and are now accelerated by digital platforms and social media that provide spaces to organise, amplify messages and recruit participants (Kozinets *et al.*, 2017; Walls *et al.*, 2025).

Brand cancellations

Brand cancellations represent an emergent form of active consumer resistance. Their discourse, mechanisms, actors and outcomes remain underexplored within marketing scholarship (Saldanha *et al.*, 2022). The growing, multidisciplinary literature depicts cancellations variously as online shaming (Holman, 2020; Wahyudiputra *et al.*, 2021), cultural backlash or boycotts (Norris, 2023; Clark, 2020; Ng, 2020; Tuominen *et al.*, 2023), a symptom of “wokeism” (Beiner, 2020), a tool for advancing social justice (Bouvier, 2020), a fast-spreading social media firestorm (Costa and Azevedo, 2024), and even a social weapon (Ahuja and Kerketta, 2021). Because of its association with both left- and right-leaning political ideologies, it is frequently labelled “cancel culture”, “call-out culture” or “corporate cancel culture” (Clark, 2020; Scheinbaum and Poehlman, 2024) and framed as a form of censorship or power asymmetry (Kim, 2025; Ng, 2020). Much of this literature focuses on debating the legitimacy of cancellations rather than empirically examining their processes and effects (Saldanha *et al.*, 2022).

In this paper, we adopt the recent empirical definition of brand cancellation as “deliberate collective action on part of consumers – today typically performed on social media – which attempts to force market change through calling for cancellation of a brand in retribution for an irreparable transgression” (Demsar *et al.*, 2023). While cancellations share similarities with other forms of active consumer resistance, they differ in two important ways. First, like other resistance behaviours, they are triggered by moral harm transgressions, which occur when a brand’s actions or communications violate societal expectations or are perceived as unethical or immoral (Costa and Azevedo, 2024; Cummings, Zafari, and Beitelspacher, 2025; Hegner *et al.*, 2017; Hobbs and O’Keefe, 2024). However, cancellations are unique in that the transgression is viewed as irreparable—an act or omission deemed unforgivable, unrecoverable and beyond repair (Kähr *et al.*, 2016), typically involving violations of ethical or moral norms concerning political ideology, racism, gender, sexuality, abuse, animal rights, sexual misconduct, environmental harm or corporate greed (Costa and Azevedo, 2024; Demsar *et al.*, 2023; Kyriakou, Papaioannou, and Komodromos, 2023). Second, because cancellations are predicated on irreparable transgressions, they move beyond efforts to restore parity, damage reputation or disrupt brand operations. Many forms of active

resistance seek redress or behavioural change, for instance, boycotts aim to restore parity (Klein, Smith, and John, 2004), negative word-of-mouth seeks reputational damage (Charlett, Garland, and Marr, 1995) and sabotage, revenge or collaborative attacks aim to inflict harm (Kähr *et al.*, 2016; Grégoire *et al.*, 2018). In contrast, a brand cancellation seeks to permanently and definitively withdraw consumer support and delegitimise the brand's existence (Cummings, Zafari, and Beitelspacher, 2025; Kyriakou, Papaioannou, and Komodromos, 2023; Ng, 2020; Saldanha *et al.*, 2022; Scheinbaum and Poehlman, 2024; Schwirblat, Freberg, and Freberg, 2022), while simultaneously signalling to other actors that such moral transgressions are unacceptable (Demsar *et al.*, 2023).

During a cancellation movement, consumers judge the irreparability of a transgression based on its type, severity and the brand's prior conduct (Cummings, Zafari, and Beitelspacher, 2025; Demsar *et al.*, 2023; Hobbs and O'Keefe, 2024). Transgressions involving political ideology, racism, gender, sexuality, abuse of employees or consumers, animal rights, sexual misconduct, environmental harm or corporate greed are especially likely to trigger cancellation calls, particularly when the brand has a history of such behaviour, often easily uncovered online (Costa and Azevedo, 2024; Demsar *et al.*, 2023; Kyriakou, Papaioannou, and Komodromos, 2023; Walls *et al.*, 2025). Consumers are generally more forgiving of first-time transgressions (Zhang *et al.*, 2024). Beyond responses to brand actions, participation in cancellation movements can also be shaped by individual factors such as political ideology, virtue signalling and social vigilantism (Mesler *et al.*, 2024). Recent research further highlights a dichotomy between accountability-seeking and punishment-seeking motivations for cancellation (Cummings, Zafari, and Beitelspacher, 2025; Parker *et al.*, 2024).

Empowered by social media platforms that amplify and monetise controversy, consumers mobilise cancellations through tactics such as awareness-building, calls to action, education, negative commenting, complaints or reviews, unfollowing brands and sharing anecdotal evidence of grievances (Farries, Kerrigan, and Siapera, 2025; Kotunova, 2024; Kyriakou, Papaioannou, and Komodromos, 2023; Lievonen, Bowden, and Luoma-aho, 2023; Walls *et al.*, 2025). Beyond calling for cancellation, consumers may impose social, psychological and economic sanctions on the brand through public shaming, encouraging boycotts, spreading misinformation, brand avoidance and negative word-of-mouth (Demsar *et al.*, 2023; Scheinbaum and Poehlman, 2024; Yanti *et al.*, 2024; Zhang *et al.*, 2024). When participation reaches critical mass, cancellations exhibit a networked contagion effect, rapidly escalating the movement's reach and impact (Demsar *et al.*, 2023; Parker *et al.*, 2024).

The outcomes of cancellations can vary widely, and brands are often compelled to respond through proactive action, public apology, passive silence or active defiance, alongside a range of other crisis communication strategies aimed at neutralising the movement (Demsar *et al.*, 2023; Hobbs and O'Keefe, 2024). Many responses draw on Social Crisis Communication Theory, which provides frameworks for mitigating reputational harm (Mishra and Maheshwari, 2025). Importantly, the literature frames cancellation as a manageable episode rather than a permanent condition, suggesting that it can be contained by identifying and neutralising the key actors involved, including the target brand, consumer groups and influential third parties (Schwirblat, Freberg, and Freberg, 2022). Sentiment can even be reversed entirely if allegations against the brand are proven false or exaggerated (Sengupta *et al.*, 2024). Whether temporary or permanent, cancellation movements are conceptually associated with reputational damage, reduced engagement, lower loyalty, consumer dissatisfaction and brand switching (Mohsen, 2022). Outcomes often depend on brand warmth and competence perceptions as well as response timing, with early responses

typically mitigating backlash more effectively than delayed ones (Saldanha *et al.*, 2022). Recent empirical evidence also shows that the severity of the moral harm transgression and the availability of brand substitutes predict whether cancellation effects are lasting or short-lived (Cummings, Zafari, and Beitelspacher, 2025). Although cancellations rarely lead to a brand's permanent removal (Hobbs and O'Keefe, 2024), the threat alone exerts pressure on firms to align their behaviour more closely with consumer expectations (Aguilar, Lopes, and Brooks, 2025).

Brand cancellations rarely occur in isolation between consumers and brands. Instead, they unfold within complex ecosystems of boundary actors who shape their trajectory (Demsar *et al.*, 2023). These actors include mainstream and online media (Clark, 2020), digital platform providers (Farries *et al.*, 2025; Hobbs and O'Keefe, 2024; Kotunova, 2024; Walls *et al.*, 2025), government agencies (Kim, 2025), brand affiliates or celebrity endorsers (Saldanha *et al.*, 2022), employers (Schwirblat, Freberg, and Freberg, 2022) and brand allies (Demsar *et al.*, 2023). Among these, social media influencers are increasingly recognised as especially influential boundary actors, capable of amplifying or buffering cancellation discourse and outcomes (Mishra and Maheshwari, 2025; Odoom, Kosiba, and Odoom, 2024; Yanti *et al.*, 2024; Zhang *et al.*, 2024). Understanding their role is therefore critical for advancing theory and guiding managerial practice. To synthesise and clarify the positioning of our work within the literature, we present Table 1, which positions our work within key studies on brand cancellation and consumer resistance. This synthesis highlights how our research builds on existing work by empirically examining how influencers can amplify or buffer brand cancellation outcomes.

Influencer signalling during a cancellation attempt

Social media influencers – defined as individuals who post content on social media in exchange for compensation (Campbell and Grimm, 2019) – have evolved from traditional brand endorsers to powerful cultural intermediaries who shape public discourse and cultural trends (Campbell and Farrell, 2020). Viewed by consumers as authentic, relatable, credible and trustworthy, influencers cultivate distinct personal brands and large, loyal followings (Kim, 2022; Lee and Eastin, 2020; Lou and Yuan, 2019). Through creating original content, positioning themselves around unique traits, and actively engaging audiences, influencers foster parasocial relationships – the illusion of enduring, one-sided social bonds (Dibble *et al.*, 2016) – that can generate almost cult-like support (Lee and Eastin, 2020; Leung, Gu, and Palmatier, 2022; Lou, Tan, and Chen, 2019). These dynamics often translate into positive attitudes and stronger purchase intentions towards both influencers and the brands they endorse (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders, 2017; De Veirman and Hudders, 2020; Hosen *et al.*, 2025; Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks, 2019; Lou and Yuan, 2019; Magrizos *et al.*, 2021). Given their ability to shape public discourse, steer brand perceptions and their own vulnerability to cancellation (Schwirblat, Freberg, and Freberg, 2022; Sengupta *et al.*, 2024), influencers are frequently entangled in brand cancellation movements (Kim, 2025) yet remain underexplored in this context.

There is growing recognition of the pivotal role influencers play in brand cancellations, with calls for deeper examination of how they can both escalate and de-escalate cancellation movements (Cummings, Zafari, and Beitelspacher, 2025; Linvill and Warren, 2024). Emerging studies position influencers as key boundary actors who legitimise or delegitimise cancellation efforts by publicly weighing in, often amplifying cancellation messages among their followers (Demsar *et al.*, 2023). Motivated by engagement gains and follower growth (Farries *et al.*, 2025), influencers extend the reach of cancellation messages and lend them credibility and authenticity, frequently determining whether movements succeed (Demsar

Table 1. Positioning our work with the brand cancellation and consumer resistance literature

Paper	Scope / context	Theory	Method	Key findings / insights
Peñaloza and Price (1993)	Defines consumer resistance as opposition to mass-produced meanings and marketing systems	Anti-consumption literature	Conceptual / ethnographic	Frames resistance as a reaction to dominant marketplace structures, laying the foundation for understanding opposition to brands and marketing as cultural critique
Kozinets and Handelman (2004)	Examines how consumer movements mobilise against dominant institutions	New social movement (NSM) theory	Ethnography	Shows that resistance is collective, value-laden, and identity-driven, aiming to shift cultural and market power structures and reconfigure the ideology of consumerism
Tian and Li (2022)	Compares influencer vs peer persuasive impact	Source credibility model	Survey	Finds that influencer endorsements outperform peer recommendations due to higher perceived expertise, except where trust and relational proximity make peers more persuasive
Saldanha, Mulye and Rahman (2022)	Examines cancel culture from a strategic marketing perspective	Power-within-relationships theory; norm enforcement	Conceptual	Argues that cancel culture redistributes power between consumers and brands, acting as a form of social sanctioning that enforces accountability. Highlights the need for managers to anticipate and respond strategically
Lievonen, Bowden and Luoma-aho (2023)	Explores online negative engagement behaviours during resistance	Negative engagement typology	Conceptual	Classifies tactics such as brandjacking, firestorming, and retaliatory acts, showing how digital resistance escalates collectively online
Demsar <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Conceptualises brand cancellation as deliberate collective consumer action on social media	Institutional theory; market-shaping	Conceptual	Defines cancellations as attempts to force market change through irreparable transgression calls and maps the actors (consumers, brands, influencers) engaged in institutional work to delegitimise or defend brands

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Paper	Scope / context	Theory	Method	Key findings / insights
Costa and Azevedo (2024)	Investigates antecedents and consequences of cancel culture firestorms and brand recovery	Moral harm theory; crisis communication	Quasi-experiment	Shows that ideological incompatibilities trigger cancellations and that brand apologies and corrective action can foster forgiveness, reduce cancellation intent, and restore purchase intentions
Zhang <i>et al.</i> (2024)	Studies influencer disapproval effects on cancellation participation	Social influence theory	Experiments	Demonstrates that influencer disapproval significantly increases cancellation participation and negative discourse, particularly among younger consumers, highlighting the amplification power of influencers
Mishra and Maheshwari (2025)	Examines brand and influencer roles in crisis communication	Situational crisis communication theory	Conceptual and empirical	Argues that influencers can act as crisis messengers and that trait-aligned influencer support de-escalates cancellations and protects brand reputation
Current paper	Tests how influencer responses amplify or buffer cancellation outcomes, and compares influencer vs peer effects	Signalling theory	Experiments	Conceptualising influencers as third-party signalers who recalibrate brand meaning, introduces “signal orchestration” as a managerial approach, and empirically demonstrates that influencers wield asymmetrical power in amplifying or buffering cancellation effects

Note(s): The papers are presented in chronological order to illustrate the evolution of thinking in this domain and to contextualise how the current study builds on prior work

et al., 2023). Credibility, reinforced through parasocial relationships, has been shown to predict consumer participation and brand avoidance, as influencers can heighten negative sentiment (Zhang *et al.*, 2024). This effect is particularly pronounced among younger consumers, who often view influencers as aspirational figures and respond strongly to influencer activism (Tuominen *et al.*, 2023). Influencers can also initiate cancellations directly by calling for boycotts or mobilising their followers, and even spark brand cancellations by association when they themselves are targeted (Parker *et al.*, 2024; Yanti *et al.*, 2024).

Conversely, influencers can help diffuse cancellation movements when engaged as credible crisis partners. Recent research shows that trait-aligned influencers (credible, expert and morally authoritative) who also display emotion-alignment (empathy, sincerity and an appropriate tone) can act as persuasive crisis messengers and support brand recovery (Mishra and Maheshwari, 2025). When influencers share authentic, informative and expert content in support of a brand, they can reduce hate emotions and lower participation in cancellation efforts (Odoom, Kosiba, and Odoom, 2024). Early engagement of trusted influencers to clarify misunderstandings or address misconduct can therefore be a highly effective strategy for de-escalating cancellation movements (Zhang *et al.*, 2024). Taken together, these findings highlight that influencers function as critical signallers whose support can either intensify or diffuse the trajectory of brand cancellation attempts.

Signalling theory (Spence, 1973) posits that actors with private information use credible, observable actions (signals) to convey otherwise hidden qualities, thereby reducing information asymmetry between senders and receivers (Bafera and Kleinert, 2023). In marketing research, brands have traditionally been positioned as the primary signallers, using cues such as advertising, pricing, warranties and Corporate Social Responsibility to shape consumer perceptions (Boulding and Kirmani, 1993; Kharouf *et al.*, 2020; Lee and Chung, 2025). In the context of brand cancellation, however, influencers act as powerful third-party signallers who can stabilise or destabilise brand meaning. By spotlighting perceived moral transgressions or reinforcing positive brand associations, influencers can either incite negative sentiment or defend the brand against reputational damage (Anderson, Sussman, and Song, 2024; van der Harst and Angelopoulos, 2024). Owing to their perceived authenticity, credibility, parasocial relationships and social presence, influencer signals carry unique persuasive weight, legitimising or delegitimising calls for cancellation (Audrezet, De Kerviler, and Moulard, 2020; Demsar *et al.*, 2023; Lee and Chung, 2025; Xie and Feng, 2023). These signals can translate into coordinated participation (or non-participation) in cancellation movements and, ultimately, into favourable or unfavourable attitudinal and behavioural brand outcomes (Zhang *et al.*, 2024; Saldanha *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, we hypothesise that:

- H1. Influencers can amplify (or buffer) the negative effects of brand cancellation on consumer responses.

The role of message source in shaping consumer responses

Persuasive communication depends not only on what is said but also on who delivers the message (Balaji *et al.*, 2023; Kim, Song, and Jang, 2021). Crisis communication research shows that “what is said” often takes the form of recognisable rhetorical and argumentative strategies that can amplify or buffer consumer responses to crises, such as brand cancellations. Rhetorical strategies view crisis responses as discursive choices, that is, deliberate ways of talking about transgressions that seek to shape how consumers interpret them (Heath and Millar, 2003). On the other hand, argumentation-based strategies are a form

of crisis manipulation, where actors engage in argumentative blame avoidance to steer how responsibility for transgressions is attributed (Hood, 2011; Ilie, 2024; Vis, 2016). Such strategies seek to shift the responsibility away from the brand to selected individuals or entities, whilst weakening ties and breaking links to transgressors to help attenuate the impact of the transgression. Doing the opposite (blaming the brand for the transgression, accepting responsibility or strengthening ties and links to transgressors) amplifies the impact on the brand and leads to crisis spill-over effects (Antonetti and Valor, 2021; Wang and Laufner, 2024).

In a crisis, persuasive buffering tactics include *bolstering* or foregrounding positive values or past good deeds; *differentiation* or separating the transgression from the brand's overall identity; *denial* or rejecting the accuracy or relevance of transgression accusations; *blame shifting* or attributing responsibility to bad actors or external circumstances; and *scapegoating* or singling out a selected individual as the focal transgressor, e.g. a senior executive described as a "single bad apple" (Antonetti and Valor, 2021; Breeze, 2024; Heath and Millar, 2003; Roehm and Tybout, 2006; Stopfner, 2024; Zhang and Lim, 2021). By contrast, persuasive amplifying tactics could include high attribution of blame by influential actors, strong negative consumer emotions, rich consumer knowledge about the transgression and intense media coverage (Antonetti and Valor, 2021; Knittel and Stango, 2014; Sato *et al.*, 2019; Von Sikorski and Herbst, 2020). As such, persuasive crisis communication or "what is said" could amplify or buffer brand cancellations, by defining who is responsible and constructing explanations of why moral harm transgressions occurred.

While what is said can exert influence independently of the source (Lindgren *et al.*, 2024; Mancosu and Vegetti, 2021), most crisis communication strategies also rely heavily on source credibility to shape persuasion (Kapoor, Balaji, and Jiang, 2021; Cassia and Magno, 2021; Cawsey and Rowley, 2016). In the context of cancellations, research shows that while peer-to-peer calls for cancellation can escalate movements, boundary actors such as influencers wield disproportionate persuasive power, legitimising or delegitimising calls for cancellation and mobilising large-scale participation (Demsar *et al.*, 2023; Mishra and Maheshwari, 2025; Odoom, Kosiba, and Odoom, 2024; Yanti *et al.*, 2024; Zhang *et al.*, 2024). Thus, the effectiveness of amplification or buffering signals is shaped not only by their content but also by the credibility and social influence of the messenger.

The persuasiveness of influencer signals in a cancellation context can be explained through the source credibility model (Ohanian, 1990, 1991). This model posits that messages from sources perceived to possess expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness (Dholakia and Stemthal, 1977; Ohanian, 1991) are more likely to influence consumer attitudes and behaviours (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Wang and Scheinbaum, 2018). Erdogan (1999) conceptualises attractiveness as qualities such as sexiness, classiness or beauty, trustworthiness as reliability, dependability and honesty, and expertise as perceived knowledge or qualification. Homophily – the degree of similarity between consumers and influencers – further strengthens credibility by increasing identification and perceived relatability (Ismagilova *et al.*, 2020). Influencer attributes such as personality, authenticity, accessibility and follower count have been shown to enhance these perceptions, making influencers particularly potent and credible sources of information (Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 2017; Kim and Lee, 2017; Weismueller *et al.*, 2020).

Influencers are generally perceived as high-profile figures with broad reach and authority (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders, 2017), whereas peers (friends or everyday contacts) are viewed as more relatable but typically less influential (Tian and Li, 2022). This raises an important question: are the persuasive effects of influencer amplification and buffering

unique to their status and visibility, or would similar effects occur if the same messages were delivered by peers? Empirical evidence suggests that influencer endorsements often outperform peer recommendations for attitudinal and behavioural outcomes, largely due to higher perceived expertise and strengthened by audience–endorser self-congruence (Tian and Li, 2022). Conversely, peer influence grows stronger when trust and relational proximity are salient. In high-involvement contexts, peer trustworthiness carries greater weight, making peer recommendations particularly persuasive (Rajaraman, Gupta, and Bharati, 2021; Corcoran *et al.*, 2024). These distinctions between influencer and peer sources are likely to shape how consumers receive, interpret and act upon brand cancellation messages. Based on this reasoning, we hypothesise that:

- H2. The effect of message type (amplification vs buffering) on brand outcomes will be moderated by message source, such that the difference between amplification and buffering will be more pronounced when the message is delivered by an influencer than by a peer.

Overview of studies

Across three studies, we investigate how brand cancellations affect consumer responses and the role of influencers in amplifying or buffering these effects (see Figure 1 for conceptual model).

All studies were conducted between March and August 2025, using online experiments administered via Prolific Academic. Study 1 tested H1: Influencers can amplify (or buffer) the negative effects of brand cancellation on consumer responses. This study served as a conceptual foundation by establishing that brand cancellation events, when amplified by influencers, produce significantly negative effects on brand evaluations and behavioural intentions. Participants were exposed to a transgression involving a fictitious brand and then viewed an influencer’s message that either amplified or buffered the call for cancellation. Study 2 extended this baseline by introducing a control condition (brand cancellation with no influencer comment) and testing whether influencer responses change consumer reactions to cancellation attempts. Rather than simply documenting negative reactions to amplified

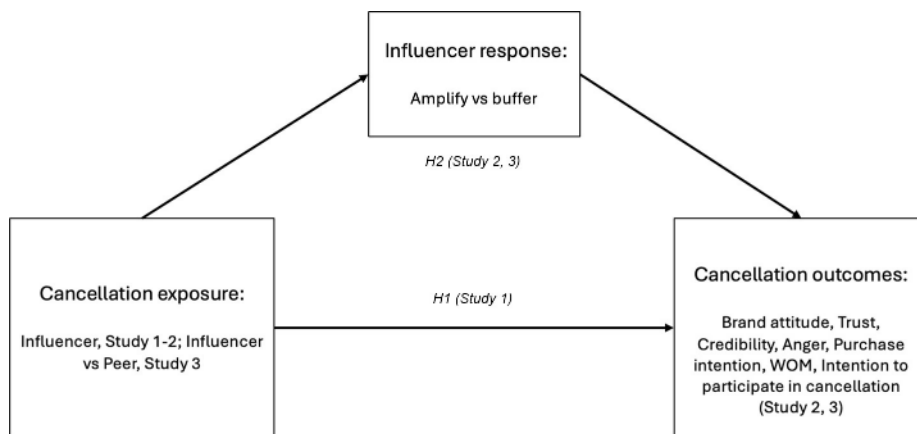


Figure 1. Conceptual model

cancellation messages (as in Study 1), Study 2 examined whether influencers actively exacerbate or mitigate these reactions through their messaging. This design allowed us to isolate the added effect of influencer responses beyond the cancellation event itself. Study 3 built upon these insights by testing *H2*, whether the effect of message type (amplification vs buffering) is moderated by the source of the message (influencer vs peer). This study addressed a key conceptual question: Are the persuasive effects of cancellation messages uniquely tied to the status and authority of influencers, or can similar outcomes emerge from everyday peers? To test this, participants read identical amplify or buffer messages that were attributed to either an influencer or a peer (friend). This design allowed us to isolate source-based effects and evaluate whether influencer-driven responses offer distinctive strategic value. Together, these studies offer a comprehensive examination of how message valence and source identity interact to shape the trajectory of brand cancellations. [Table 2](#) presents an overview of all three studies.

Study 1

Study 1 tests *H1*, establishing that influencers can amplify or buffer the negative effects of brand cancellation on consumer responses, demonstrating that amplified (buffered) messages worsen (enhance) brand attitudes, trust, credibility, purchase and word-of-mouth intentions and heighten (reduce) anger. To isolate the effects of brand cancellation, we experimentally manipulated a cancellation message in the context of a reputational crisis. Participants were randomly assigned to condition where a social media influencer [1] called for cancellation (amplify) or buffered the call for cancellation. This design allowed us to isolate the effect of amplified cancellation messaging on key consumer responses, including brand attitude, credibility, trust, anger, purchase intention and word-of-mouth intentions.

Method

A total of 177 US participants were recruited via Prolific in March 2025 ($M_{\text{age}} = 39.63$ years, 13.66, age range = 18–78; 46% male, 54% female). The study employed a between-subjects experimental design, and no participants completed more than one of our studies. First, participants read a scenario describing a moral harm transgression committed by the fictitious coffee brand Lumeva, in which a resurfaced video revealed the founder making racist and sexist remarks, prompting public outrage. Immediately after reading the scenario, participants completed a single-item comprehension check to assess the extent to which they perceived the situation as involving a serious moral concern, consistent with the approach used by [Beldad and von Rosenstiel \(2024\)](#). Responses were recorded on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree), with a mean score of 5.38 ($SD = 1.75$), indicating that participants generally recognised the scenario as reflecting a morally problematic event.

Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions reflecting different influencer responses (buffer vs amplify cancellation; see [Appendix 1](#)). In the buffer condition, participants viewed a simulated social media post from a fictional sustainability influencer who acknowledged the founder's offensive remarks but defended the broader efforts of the brand's team, expressing continued support and encouraging a more measured response. In the amplify condition, the same influencer strongly condemned the brand and publicly cut ties, thereby reinforcing and escalating the public backlash. The posts were equivalent in length and structure but differed in evaluative tone and stance.

Finally, participants completed the dependent measures. Brand attitude was adapted from [\(Yi, 1990\)](#) and measured on a five-item bipolar semantic differential scale (Bad–good, Unfavourable–favourable, Unlikeable–likeable, Unappealing–appealing, Unpleasant–

Table 2. Overview of studies

Study	Purpose	Sample ^a	Design	Message conditions	Source conditions	Dependent variables
Study 1	Establish baseline effects of brand cancellation messages on consumer responses	<i>n</i> = 177	Between-subjects experiment	Amplify vs buffer	Influencer only	Brand attitude, brand credibility, brand trust, anger, purchase intention, word-of-mouth intention
Study 2	Examine whether influencer responses can amplify or buffer the effects of brand cancellation	<i>n</i> = 182	2 (message type: amplify vs influencer only) between-subjects design	Amplify vs buffer	Influencer only	Brand attitude, credibility, trust, anger, purchase intention, word-of-mouth, intention to participate
Study 3	Test whether the effects of influencer amplification are distinct from peer amplification	<i>n</i> = 298	2 (message type: amplify vs influencer vs peer) between-subjects design	Amplify vs buffer	Influencer vs peer	Brand attitude, credibility, trust, anger, purchase intention, word-of-mouth, intention to participate

Note(s): ^a = all respondents US residents

pleasant, $\alpha = 0.989$). Brand credibility was adapted from [Ohanian \(1990\)](#) and assessed using three-items on a bipolar semantic differential scale (Not credible-credible, Unreliable-reliable, Unbelievable-believable, $\alpha = 0.967$). We adapted a measure of brand trust [Chaudhuri and Holbrook \(2001\)](#) which was measured with four items on a seven-point Likert scale (I would trust the Lumeva brand, I could rely on the Lumeva brand, Lumeva is an honest brand, Lumeva is a safe brand, $\alpha = 0.976$). A three-item scale was adapted from [Beldad and von Rosenstiel \(2024\)](#) to measure Anger (I would be angry at the company, I would be upset with the company, I would be outraged by the company, $\alpha = 0.988$). For purchase intention, we adapted two-items from [Ham and Kim \(2019\)](#) (I would consider buying from the brand, it is probable that I would purchase from the brand, $\alpha = 0.971$). Finally, we measured WOM intention with four items adapted from [Ham and Kim \(2019\)](#) (I would encourage friends to buy from the brand, I would encourage family members to buy from the brand, I would recommend the brand to others seeking my opinion, I would speak positively about the brand and its products, $\alpha = 0.984$). The survey took approximately eight minutes to complete.

Results

Comprehension checks. The comprehension check confirmed the effectiveness of the scenario in conveying a moral harm crisis, with participants rating the situation as involving a serious moral concern ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.75$) on a seven-point Likert scale. Furthermore, respondents did not report significant differences between influencer response conditions (0: buffer vs 1: amplify) in terms of being perceived as believable ($M_0 = 5.47$, $SD = 1.32$; $M_1 = 5.68$, $SD = 1.53$), $F(1, 175) = 0.95$, $p = 0.330$, $\eta^2 = 0.005$, 95% CI [0.000, 0.046]; convincing ($M_0 = 5.39$, $SD = 1.36$; $M_1 = 5.61$, $SD = 1.47$), $F(1, 175) = 1.07$, $p = 0.303$, $\eta^2 = 0.006$, 95% CI [0.000, 0.048]; reasonable ($M_0 = 5.62$, $SD = 1.27$; $M_1 = 5.63$, $SD = 1.57$), $F(1, 175) = 0.002$, $p = 0.966$, $\eta^2 = 0.000$, 95% CI [0.000, 0.003]; or authentic ($M_0 = 5.35$, $SD = 1.33$; $M_1 = 5.44$, $SD = 1.39$), $F(1, 175) = 0.18$, $p = 0.673$, $\eta^2 = 0.001$, 95% CI [0.000, 0.030].

Main effects. For all studies, analyses were conducted in SPSS v29. We conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with influencer responses (buffer vs amplify cancellation) as the between-subjects factor, with results presented in [Table 3](#) with effect sizes (partial eta squared) and 95% confidence intervals presented to assess the magnitude and precision of effects. Results reveal that brand attitude was lower in the amplify cancellation condition than in the buffer cancellation condition. Brand credibility was also lower in the amplify cancellation condition than in the buffer cancellation condition. Trust was also reduced in the amplify cancellation condition compared to the buffer cancellation condition. Participants in the amplify cancellation condition reported significantly higher anger than those in the buffer cancellation condition. In the amplify cancellation condition, purchase intention was lower than the buffer cancellation condition. A similar effect was found for word-of-mouth intentions, with the amplify cancellation condition scoring lower than the buffer cancellation condition.

Discussion

Study 1 confirmed that when an influencer amplifies a call for cancellation, that key brand outcomes can be undermined. Exposure to the cancellation amplification condition led to lower brand attitude, credibility and trust, alongside heightened anger. We also found reduced purchase and word-of-mouth intentions. These findings highlight risk of reputational damage when brands commit moral harm transgressions and subsequently face cancellation attempts. Taken together, these findings provide support for *H1*, showing that influencers can either amplify or buffer the negative effects of a brand cancellation. Study 1

Table 3. Study 1 MANOVA results

Dependent variable	Message type: Buffer M, SD	Message type: Amplify M, SD	F	Partial- η^2	Sig.	95% CI
Brand attitude	6.07, 0.98	3.19, 1.80	185.68	0.52	<0.001	0.41, 0.59
Brand credibility	5.84, 0.97	3.64, 1.81	108.38	0.38	<0.001	0.27, 0.47
Brand trust	5.61, 1.08	3.32, 1.74	115.65	0.40	<0.001	0.29, 0.49
Anger	1.92, 1.45	4.69, 1.93	118.98	0.41	<0.001	0.30, 0.50
Purchase intention	5.60, 1.42	3.34, 1.92	80.83	0.32	<0.001	0.21, 0.41
WOM intentions	5.33, 1.50	2.92, 1.82	92.46	0.35	<0.001	0.24, 0.44

Note(s): $df = 1, 175$

therefore establishes the foundational effect that influencer signalling meaningfully shapes downstream brand evaluations and intentions. These findings suggest that calls for cancellation drive negative evaluations across the board.

Study 2

Study 2 extends *H1*, introducing a control condition to test whether influencer amplification and buffering exert incremental effects beyond the cancellation event itself. We expect that the influencer's response would shape consumer reactions to the brand cancellation, such that an influencer response that was critical of the brand (amplifying the cancellation) would exacerbate negative outcomes, while an influencer response that was supportive of the brand (buffering the cancellation) would mitigate them. To test this, all participants were exposed to the same brand cancellation scenario and were then randomly assigned to view either an amplifying (critical) or buffering (supportive) influencer response, presented in the form of a social media post (see [Appendix 1](#)). Responses across conditions were compared to assess differences in the same brand outcomes as in Study 1.

Method

A total of 249 US participants were recruited via Prolific in March 2025 ($M_{\text{age}} = 41.44$ years, $SD = 14.92$; age range = 18–77; 48% male, 51% female, 1% preferred not to disclose). The study employed a between-subjects experimental design, with participants randomly assigned to one of three conditions: a control condition (brand cancellation with no influencer comments), an amplify condition (where the cancellation description was accompanied by an influencer who amplified the cancellation message and was critical of the brand), and a buffer condition (where the cancellation description was accompanied by an influencer who buffered or downplayed the message and was supportive of the brand). As in Study 1, the scenario involved a fictitious coffee brand, Lumeva. Following exposure to the scenario, participants completed the same set of multi-item scales used in the previous study: brand attitude ($\alpha = 0.986$), brand credibility ($\alpha = 0.956$), brand trust ($\alpha = 0.971$), anger ($\alpha = 0.971$), purchase intention ($\alpha = 0.970$) and WOM intention ($\alpha = 0.980$).

In addition, we measure intention to participate in the cancellation on two items, "I would actively participate in the cancellation of Lumeva by sharing information and encouraging others to join" and "I would take action against Lumeva, such as signing petitions, posting online or directly expressing my disapproval" ($\alpha = 0.940$). These items were developed deductively, drawing on prior research in consumer activism and collective action (e.g. [Kozinets and Handelman, 2004](#)), and were designed to capture both expressive and action-

oriented forms of participation. Consistent with [Rossiter's \(2011\)](#) guidance on scale design for concrete and unidimensional constructs, we opted for a two-item format given the behavioural specificity of the outcome. Although three or more items are typically recommended in psychometric modelling, two-item (or even single-item) measures have demonstrated strong reliability and predictive validity for narrow constructs ([Bergkvist and Rossiter, 2007](#)). All scales demonstrated high internal consistency. The study followed a structured flow: random assignment to condition, scenario exposure, influencer post viewing (for experimental conditions), manipulation checks and outcome measures. Average survey duration was approximately nine minutes.

Results

Manipulation check. In Study 2, participants were presented with a scenario involving a moral harm brand crisis. As expected, participants perceived the reason behind the call for cancellation in the scenario as being high on moral harm across all conditions [control ($M = 5.84$, $SD = 1.47$); amplify ($M = 6.08$, $SD = 1.94$); buffer ($M = 6.04$, $SD = 1.24$)], with no significant differences, $F(2, 246) = 0.771$, $p = 0.464$, $\eta^2 = 0.006$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.03]. For the two experimental conditions (buffer vs amplify), we assessed how participants interpreted the influencer's response to the cancellation. Respondents rated whether the influencer was attempting to calm (1) or intensify (7) the backlash. As intended, there was a significant difference, $F(2, 246) = 20.16$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.14$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.22], with those in the amplify condition ($M = 5.59$, $SD = 1.58$) significantly more likely to view the influencer as intensifying the backlash than those in the buffer condition ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.82$).

We also assess our scenario quality with a one-way MANOVA on perceived believability, convincingness, reasonableness and authenticity. No significant differences were found across conditions. Believability ratings were similar across groups, $F(2, 246) = 2.25$, $p = 0.107$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.000, 0.058], as were ratings of convincingness, $F(2, 246) = 2.03$, $p = 0.133$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.000, 0.055], reasonableness, $F(2, 246) = 2.31$, $p = 0.102$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.000, 0.059] and authenticity, $F(2, 246) = 0.83$, $p = 0.437$, $\eta^2 = 0.007$, 95% CI [0.000, 0.035]. These results suggest that participants perceived the scenario as intended, supporting the validity of the experimental manipulation.

Main effects. In terms of brand outcomes, our dependent variables again included brand attitude, credibility, trust, anger, purchase intention, WOM and intention to participate in the cancellation. All MANOVA results are presented in [Table 4](#). Results showed that brand attitude differed significantly across conditions. Pairwise comparisons indicated that participants in the amplify condition reported significantly less favourable brand attitudes than those in the control condition ($p = 0.006$), while participants in the buffer condition reported significantly more favourable attitudes than control ($p = 0.002$). Brand credibility also varied significantly by condition. Participants in the amplify condition perceived the brand as significantly less credible than the control group ($p = 0.012$), whereas participants in the buffer condition perceived the brand as significantly more credible than control ($p < 0.001$). A similar pattern emerged for trust. Respondents in the amplify condition expressed significantly lower trust than control ($p = 0.025$), while those in the buffer condition reported significantly higher trust ($p = 0.003$). For anger, there were no significant differences across conditions. Pairwise comparisons showed that neither the amplify condition ($p = 0.157$) nor the buffer condition ($p = 0.757$) differed significantly from control. There was a significant effect for purchase intention, with participants in the amplify condition reporting marginally lower intention than control ($p = 0.074$), and those in the buffer condition reporting significantly higher intention ($p = 0.003$). WOM intentions also differed significantly across conditions. Participants in the amplify condition reported

Table 4. Study 2 MANOVA results

Dependent variable	Control condition; M, SD	Influencer (amplify); M, SD	Influencer (buffer); M, SD	F	Partial- η^2	Sig.	95% CI
Brand attitude	3.64, 1.85	2.89, 1.68	4.51, 1.63	20.16	0.14	< 0.001	0.07, 0.22
Brand credibility	3.95, 1.66	3.26, 1.88	4.92, 1.49	21.62	0.15	< 0.001	0.07, 0.23
Brand trust	3.61, 1.78	2.99, 1.81	4.42, 1.53	15.65	0.11	< 0.001	0.05, 0.19
Anger	4.40, 1.96	4.81, 1.95	4.30, 1.65	1.90	0.02	< 0.152	0.00, 0.05
Purchase intention	3.45, 1.87	2.93, 1.84	4.31, 1.72	13.29	0.10	< 0.001	0.03, 0.17
WOM intentions	3.20, 1.98	2.59, 1.73	3.90, 1.68	12.09	0.09	< 0.001	0.03, 0.16
Intention to participate ^a	3.96, 1.92	4.68, 1.85	3.38, 1.76	11.26	0.08	< 0.001	0.03, 0.15

Note(s): df = 2, 246; ^a = post hoc comparison reveal significant difference between conditions

significantly lower WOM intention compared to control ($p = 0.031$), whereas those in the buffer condition reported significantly higher WOM than control ($p = 0.016$). Finally, consumer motivation to participate in brand cancellation differed significantly across conditions. Participants in the amplify condition expressed significantly greater motivation to participate than those in the control group ($p = 0.014$), while participants in the buffer condition reported marginally lower motivation than control ($p = 0.051$).

Discussion

Study 2 isolated the effect of influencer messaging by comparing amplification and buffering conditions against a no-influencer control condition. Results show that influencers play an important role in shaping consumer perceptions of, and responses to, brand cancellation attempts. Specifically, an influencer can either worsen or improve brand outcomes depending on their response. Our results showed that when an influencer amplified the cancellation, participants reported lower brand attitude, credibility, trust, purchase intention and word-of-mouth compared to control. In contrast, when an influencer buffered the cancellation, these outcomes improved. We found that respondent's intention to participate in the cancellation attempt were also impacted, suggesting that influencer criticism can increase engagement in the cancellation. The buffer condition reduced these effects compared to the control, showing that support from an influencer can reduce the desire to act against the brand. We found that anger did not significantly differ across conditions, indicating that emotional reactions to moral harm transgressions may be less responsive to influencer input. Overall, these results again support *H1* by demonstrating that influencer amplification exacerbates negative brand outcomes beyond the cancellation event itself, while buffering mitigates these effects relative to control. Study 2 therefore strengthens the initial evidence from Study 1 and provides the rationale for examining whether these effects depend on who delivers the message, which is the focus of Study 3.

Study 3

Study 3 tests *H2*, examining whether message source moderates the effects of amplification and buffering. While our first two studies demonstrated that influencers can significantly shape consumer reactions to brand cancellation through amplification or buffering, it remains unclear whether these effects are unique to influencers or reflect broader message dynamics, regardless of source. To test this, all participants were exposed to the same brand cancellation scenario and randomly assigned to read one of two message types, a post buffering or amplifying the call for cancellation which was attributed to one of two message sources, either a social media influencer or a peer (a friend). This design allowed us to assess whether message source moderates the impact of message type (amplification or buffer) on key brand outcomes, offering insight into whether influencer effects are distinct, or part of a broader communicative process.

Method

A total of 298 US participants were recruited via Prolific in August 2025 ($M_{\text{age}} = 39.54$, $SD = 12.64$; age range = 19–79; 56% male, 43% female, 1% preferred not to disclose). The study employed a between-subjects experimental design, with participants randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (message type: amplify vs buffer) \times 2 (message source: influencer vs peer) factorial design. All participants were first exposed to a brand cancellation scenario involving the fictitious coffee brand, Lumeva. Next, they read a scenario that was allocated based on random assignment and varied in terms of reading a post from an influencer or a friend (peer) who was either amplifying or buffering a call for brand

cancellation. The influencer and peer posts were matched for message content, differing only in the identity of the source (see [Appendix 2](#) for full scenario details). Following exposure to the scenario, participants completed the same set of multi-item scales used in the previous studies, measuring brand attitude ($\alpha = 0.984$), credibility ($\alpha = 0.955$), trust ($\alpha = 0.967$), anger ($\alpha = 0.972$), purchase intention ($\alpha = 0.950$), WOM intention ($\alpha = 0.969$) and intention to participate in the cancellation ($\alpha = 0.946$). Participants completed the study in a single session (approx. eight minutes), which followed a consistent procedure: scenario reading, source manipulation (influencer or peer), message exposure (amplify or buffer) and then dependent measures.

Results

Manipulation check. Two variables were used to assess the effectiveness of the manipulation. First, participants rated the extent to which the situation described in the scenario raised a serious moral concern. As expected, results were consistent between conditions, $F(1, 296) = 0.20, p = 0.887, \eta^2 = 0.00, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.00, 0.10]$, for the peer ($M = 5.67, SD = 1.59$) or influencer condition ($M = 5.65, SD = 1.46$). Second, participants were asked to evaluate whether the post they read was an attempt to calm (1) or intensify (7) the backlash. Results confirm the manipulation, with those in the amplify condition more likely to rate the scenario as intensifying the backlash ($M = 6.24, SD = 1.37$) compared to those in the buffer condition ($M = 1.70, SD = 1.32$), $F(1, 296) = 851.17, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.74, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.70, 0.78]$.

Main effects. We conducted a 2 (message type: amplify vs buffer) \times 2 (message source: influencer vs peer) MANOVA with all outcome variables. We report means and standard deviations for all conditions in [Table 5](#) and main and interaction effects in [Table 6](#). Across most outcomes, a consistent and significant main effect of message type emerged. Amplified cancellation messages resulted in significantly more negative brand evaluations than buffered messages. For instance, participants exposed to amplification reported lower brand attitudes than those exposed to buffering. This effect was not moderated by message source, nor was there a main effect of source on brand attitude. For brand credibility, a significant main effect of message type was observed, with lower credibility in the amplification condition compared to buffering. Importantly, this was qualified by a significant interaction between source and message type. Results suggest that credibility was most diminished when amplification came from an influencer rather than a peer. A similar pattern emerged for brand trust. Participants reported lower trust when exposed to amplified messages than buffered ones. Again, the interaction was significant, indicating that the amplification effect was especially pronounced when communicated by an influencer compared to a peer. For anger, there were no significant main or interaction effects, suggesting that message framing and source did not differentially influence affective responses.

A significant main effect of message type emerged for purchase intention. Participants exposed to amplification reported lower intention to purchase than those exposed to buffering. A significant interaction revealed that this effect was especially pronounced when the amplification was delivered by an influencer, as compared to a peer. Word-of-mouth intentions followed a similar pattern. Amplified messages lowered WOM intention overall, although neither the main effect of source nor the interaction reached significance. Finally, intention to participate in the cancellation was higher under amplification than buffering, with no significant effect of source or interaction.

Table 5. Study 3 means and standard deviations

Dependent variable	Message type	Message source	
		Influencer; M, SD	Peer; M, SD
Brand attitude	Buffer	3.81, 1.70	3.59, 1.84
	Amplify	2.55, 1.45	2.65, 1.44
Brand credibility	Buffer	4.23, 1.69	3.77, 1.85
	Amplify	2.55, 1.20	2.97, 1.67
Brand trust	Buffer	3.88, 1.59	3.46, 1.85
	Amplify	2.23, 1.06	2.65, 1.52
Anger	Buffer	4.46, 1.66	4.76, 1.91
	Amplify	4.82, 1.92	5.11, 1.94
Purchase intention	Buffer	3.65, 1.72	3.32, 1.77
	Amplify	2.34, 1.31	2.88, 1.72
Word-of-mouth	Buffer	2.98, 1.64	2.80, 1.57
	Amplify	2.23, 1.39	2.17, 1.39
Intention to participate	Buffer	3.13, 1.90	3.29, 1.95
	Amplify	3.88, 1.99	4.08, 2.02

Table 6. Study 3 main and interaction effects

Dependent variable	Main effect: Message source	Main effect: Message type	Interaction effect
Brand attitude	F = 0.12, $p = 0.726$	F = 34.24, $p < 0.001$	F = 0.73, $p = 0.393$
Brand credibility	F = 0.01, $p = 0.907$	F = 43.58, $p < 0.001$	F = 5.51, $p = 0.020$
Brand trust	F = 0.00, $p = 0.992$	F = 48.25, $p < 0.001$	F = 5.72, $p = 0.017$
Anger	F = 1.86, $p = 0.173$	F = 2.68, $p = 0.103$	F = 0.00, $p = 0.976$
Purchase intention	F = 0.33, $p = 0.566$	F = 21.09, $p < 0.001$	F = 5.20, $p = 0.023$
Word-of-mouth	F = 0.48, $p = 0.488$	F = 15.63, $p < 0.001$	F = 0.12, $p = 0.730$
Intention to participate	F = 0.63, $p = 0.428$	F = 11.33, $p < 0.001$	F = 0.01, $p = 0.935$

Discussion

Study 3 investigated whether the effects observed in Study 2, specifically, the impact of influencer amplification on brand cancellations, are unique to influencers or whether similar effects arise when identical messages are communicated by peers. The findings provide further evidence of the central role that influencers play in amplifying or buffering brand cancellations. We find that the interaction between message type and source was significant for several key variables. In particular, brand credibility and trust were more severely diminished when amplification came from an influencer rather than a peer. A similar interaction emerged for purchase intention, with the combination of amplification and influencer source leading to the lowest purchase likelihood. These findings suggest that influencers are not merely conduits of communication but act as amplifiers of reputational damage when voicing cancellation messages. The heightened impact of influencer amplification on trust- and action-oriented outcomes reflects their perceived authority and reach in digital discourse.

In contrast, no main or interaction effects were found for anger, indicating that emotional responses were not significantly shaped by message framing or source in this context. Similarly, although intention to participate in the cancellation was significantly higher under amplification than buffering, this effect was not moderated by message source (influencer vs peer). These findings suggest that while influencers may intensify the credibility and

behavioural consequences of cancellation messages, their presence may not necessarily heighten emotional arousal beyond that elicited by peers.

Taken together, these results reinforce the importance of message framing in the brand cancellation process and illuminate the asymmetric influence of social media influencers. These findings provide support for *H2* on key cognitive and behavioural outcomes, showing that amplification undermines credibility, trust and purchase intention more when delivered by an influencer rather than a peer, consistent with asymmetric source effects. While amplified messages generally erode brand outcomes more than buffered ones, this impact is especially potent when delivered by influencers, who function not only as high-reach messengers but as active agents who can escalate or temper the effects of cancellation discourse. Although emotional reactions and cancellation participation were not moderated by source, the broader pattern confirms that influencer messages carry disproportionate persuasive weight. Study 3 therefore provides the final piece of evidence that source matters, completing the theoretical model across the three studies and underscoring the reputational risks associated with influencer amplification and the need to proactively manage influencer communications during periods of public scrutiny.

General discussion

Brands today operate in a heightened climate of accountability in which perceived moral, ethical or political transgressions can rapidly trigger collective backlash. While brand crises are not new, the ways in which consumers respond, organise and mobilise have been transformed in the age of social media. Our three studies collectively demonstrate that brand cancellations are not simply reputational events, but dynamic signalling processes shaped by the actions of multiple actors. Influencers emerge as powerful third-party signallers whose messages can either intensify reputational harm or attenuate it, with effects that are stronger than those of ordinary peers. More broadly, these findings speak to the wider social implications of cancellation movements, showing how influencer commentary can accelerate public scrutiny, legitimise collective action and shift attention to underlying social justice issues. In highlighting how influencer voices can amplify concerns about racism, discrimination or moral misconduct, the work demonstrates the dual potential of cancellation: as a mechanism for public accountability and reform, but also as a process that can escalate harm when signals are unverified or emotionally charged. Our findings provide a richer understanding of how cancellation movements unfold, highlighting that outcomes depend not only on the severity of the transgression but also on how meaning is framed and circulated through networked platforms (Costa and Azevedo, 2024; Demsar *et al.*, 2023; Saldanha *et al.*, 2022). By extending signalling theory (Spence, 1973) to include third-party signallers, this research frames brand cancellation as a process of co-created meaning-making and digitally mediated mobilisation, offering insights for both scholars and practitioners.

Theoretical contributions

Our research advances understanding of cancel culture and corporate cancellation by moving beyond descriptive accounts of consumer outrage to model the mechanisms that intensify or mitigate reputational effects. We show that cancellation trajectories are critically shaped by how signals are legitimised, amplified or buffered by boundary actors, particularly influencers (Mishra and Maheshwari, 2025; Odoom, Kosiba, and Odoom, 2024; Yanti *et al.*, 2024). This positions brand cancellation as a process of competitive signalling rather than a one-way reaction to transgression severity. The study extends signalling theory by conceptualising influencers as independent, third-party signallers who recalibrate the

meaning of a brand transgression. Traditional signalling models focus on firms as the primary senders of signals (Boulding and Kirmani, 1993; Kharouf *et al.*, 2020), whereas our work demonstrates that influencers function as active meaning-makers who can amplify reputational damage or help restore credibility. We introduce the notion of signal orchestration, where meaning is shaped by the interplay of competing signals from brands, consumers and influencers (Bafera and Kleinert, 2023). Our findings show that these effects are particularly pronounced when the message source is an influencer rather than a peer, underscoring the epistemic authority influencers hold in digital spaces (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders, 2017; Tian and Li, 2022).

Our results also suggest that influencer actions have the capacity to shift reputational influence between brands and consumers, effectively steering the direction of cancellation movements. While we did not formally theorise or test marketplace power as a construct, this implication highlights an important opportunity for future research: to examine how perceived power asymmetries or stakeholder legitimacy moderate consumer responses to influencer amplification or buffering. Social media acts as the accelerant that spreads these signals quickly and widely, algorithmically privileging controversy and allowing cancellations to escalate at speed (Farries *et al.*, 2025; Kozinets *et al.*, 2017). Together, these insights highlight cancellations as co-constructed, digitally accelerated events in which meaning is dynamically contested (Gabrielli *et al.*, 2021; Kumar *et al.*, 2025). In doing so, our findings complement and extend prior literature on persuasion knowledge and advertising disclosures by showing that the perceived origin and intention behind a message significantly alter its downstream effects (Boerman *et al.*, 2018; Xie and Feng, 2023). Our work also positions influencers as cultural intermediaries whose authenticity and credibility, previously associated primarily with positive endorsement effects (Audrezet *et al.*, 2020; Lee and Chung, 2025), can be mobilised to intensify or diffuse negative sentiment during moments of crisis.

Managerial contributions

Our findings offer guidance for brand managers, social media teams and other stakeholders navigating the reputational risks of cancellation movements. First, influencer management should be elevated from a peripheral marketing function to a strategic risk and governance capability. Brands can proactively map their influencer ecosystem, assessing which influencers are value-aligned, credible and hold moral authority, and scenario-plan how each might amplify or buffer cancellation calls (Aw and Labrecque, 2023; Demsar *et al.*, 2023). This practice shifts management thinking from simply maximising influencer reach to actively curating a network of partners who can either defend or critically challenge the brand in ways that preserve long-term legitimacy.

Second, brands should embed influencer engagement protocols into crisis communication strategies and response playbooks. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007) recommends aligning crisis responses with perceived responsibility, and our findings suggest that incorporating influencer voices into those responses can be highly effective. For instance, in cases where a brand faces accidental or low-responsibility crises, instructive and adjusting strategies (providing information, expressing sympathy) can be strengthened by early engagement of trusted influencers who can clarify misinformation and humanise the brand's response. In preventable crises, accommodative strategies such as apology and corrective action can be amplified by influencers to signal sincerity and commitment to reform. Real-world cases such as Nike's continued partnership with Colin Kaepernick, which framed the controversy as a values-driven stance, or Ben and Jerry's public advocacy

following activist backlash, illustrate how early, aligned messaging can transform a cancellation moment into an opportunity to strengthen brand meaning and consumer trust.

Third, rather than reacting after influencer amplification has intensified a crisis, managers should co-create response messages with credible influencers in advance. This approach aligns with recent research showing that trait- and emotion-aligned influencers can act as effective crisis messengers (Mishra and Maheshwari, 2025; Odoom, Kosiba, and Odoom, 2024). Thinking therefore shifts from a reactive “damage control” stance to a proactive approach that treats influencers as co-creators of meaning and partners in reputational repair rather than merely channels to broadcast brand messages. This shift represents a mindset of strategic signal orchestration, where managers intentionally shape reputational influence rather than leaving it to chance.

Fourth, brands should invest in sophisticated social listening and early-warning systems capable of monitoring not only brand mentions but also influencer commentary, sentiment shifts and emerging hashtags that may signal the onset of a cancellation movement (Walls *et al.*, 2025). These tools should be integrated into daily operations, with dedicated teams responsible for interpreting the signals and escalating them when risk thresholds are met. By detecting potential flashpoints early, brands can engage with stakeholders before narratives harden and positions polarise, participating in the meaning-making process while the story is still contested and fluid. A leading example is Starbucks’ rapid and transparent communication strategy during employee union controversies, which involved simultaneous internal communication and external messaging from respected employee advocates, helping to contain reputational fallout.

Finally, brands may collaborate with industry associations to pool anonymised monitoring data and establish sector-wide early-warning frameworks, enabling collective preparedness for issues that could undermine trust across entire categories, such as allegations of labour exploitation, greenwashing or discriminatory practices. Such collaborative systems not only protect individual brands but also safeguard industry legitimacy and help to prevent isolated transgressions from eroding consumer trust in entire sectors. Beyond managerial practice, our results carry implications for public policy makers and platforms. Regulators and social media platforms may consider designing policies that promote transparency in influencer participation during high-stakes public discourse. For example, platforms could explore mechanisms that flag when influencers are compensated to take a stance or that provide contextual information enabling consumers to evaluate the independence and credibility of the message. NGOs and activist organisations can leverage these insights to engage influencers more strategically and ethically, encouraging collaboration that is grounded in verified evidence, promotes constructive dialogue and avoids inciting disproportionate outrage.

Limitations and future research

As with all research, the current study is not without limitations. First, while our use of fictitious brand scenarios allowed us to control for prior brand associations and isolate the effects of cancellation dynamics, this approach may limit the ecological validity of our findings. Real-world brand cancellations are often shaped by complex brand histories, industry contexts and pre-existing consumer sentiments (Gabrielli *et al.*, 2021). Future studies could replicate our experimental design using actual brand cases, either historical or unfolding in real time, to better understand how pre-existing brand equity or stakeholder familiarity moderate consumer responses to cancellation and influencer signalling (e.g. Xie and Feng, 2023). Relatedly, although our empirical context focused on a racism and sexism-based cancellation, future research could examine whether similar signalling dynamics emerge across other forms of firestorm triggers, including gender discrimination, greenwashing, political animosity,

ideological issues or animal rights to name a few. While these triggers vary in content, they share core characteristics of moralised contestation and public scrutiny, suggesting that amplification and buffering processes may generalise across socially charged domains. However, the strength of these effects may differ depending on the level of moral consensus surrounding the issue, creating an opportunity for comparative research. Generalisation may also vary by product category: identity-expressive categories such as fashion or lifestyle may be more vulnerable to influencer-driven amplification than utilitarian categories with weaker symbolic meaning. Finally, future work could investigate whether pre-crisis brand commitment offers reputational insulation by motivating consumers to reinterpret or discount negative influencer signals, thereby attenuating amplification or strengthening buffering.

Second, while we captured key outcome variables including brand attitude, trust and behavioural intentions, our studies relied on self-reported measures. We investigated three behavioural dependent variables (purchase intention, word-of-mouth intention and intention to participate in the cancellation) to capture both supportive and oppositional consumer actions. However, we recognise the value of extending this behavioural focus. Although these are standard in advertising and consumer research (see for example [McQuarrie and Mick, 2003](#); [Phillips and McQuarrie, 2009](#)), they are subject to social desirability and do not always reflect actual behaviour. Future research could incorporate observed or incentivised behaviours, particularly collected from alternative data sources such as clickstream analysis, boycott participation or actual brand purchase data. While this was beyond the scope of our research, it would offer a more robust test of whether and how consumers follow through to consumer intentions over time. Moreover, while Study 3 examined message source differences, the influencer and peer conditions were held constant in message content. Future research could explore how message framing (e.g. moral vs pragmatic appeals), emotional tone or disclosure type interact with source identity to shape persuasion and participation ([Audrezet et al., 2020](#); [Kim, 2022](#)).

Finally, this research focused on general social media influencers but did not differentiate between influencer tiers (e.g. micro, macro, celebrity) or platform-specific dynamics. Given that influence is contextually constructed and algorithmically mediated ([Lee and Chung, 2025](#); [Zhang et al., 2021](#)), future research might examine how influencer type, parasocial relationship strength and platform affordances (e.g. Instagram vs TikTok) shape the dynamics of cancellation. Prior work has shown that heightened parasocial interaction increases the persuasive weight of influencer communications ([Conde and Casais, 2023](#)), which raises important questions around how different follower relationships moderate backlash or buffering effects. Exploring these dimensions would extend our understanding of how digital power asymmetries are constructed, sustained and potentially subverted within the evolving cancellation landscape.

Note

- [1.] The influencer ('Jordan Kai Green') was constructed as a fictitious persona to maintain experimental control. A short supplemental survey (N = 100, US Prolific) confirmed low prior familiarity (M = 1.15, SD = 0.53 on a 1–5 scale) and perceived credibility (M = 4.88, SD = 1.23), measured on an eight-item, seven-point bipolar scale adapted from [Ohanian \(1990\)](#).

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Appendix 1. Study 1 and study 2 scenarios

<p>About the brand (preamble, included in Study 1-3) Lumeva is a leading sustainable coffee brand renowned for its commitment to ethical sourcing and environmental responsibility. The brand is founded on the principles of transparency, fairness, and conscious consumption, and produces high-quality, ethically sourced coffee using beans grown through environmentally friendly farming practices and fair-trade partnerships. Lumeva has built a strong following among socially and environmentally conscious consumers and regularly collaborates with sustainability advocates and influencers to promote its mission. With a focus on reducing its environmental footprint and driving positive change within the coffee industry, Lumeva positions itself as a pioneer in the movement towards more ethical and sustainable coffee production.</p> <p>You are scrolling through social media and see a recently resurfaced video showing Lumeva’s founder making offensive remarks in an interview from several years ago. In the clip, the founder is heard making racist and sexist comments about employees and customers. The video has quickly gone viral, sparking widespread backlash online. Social media users are outraged, with many calling for the brand to be cancelled. Hashtags like #CancelLumeva are trending, and thousands of people are posting about their disappointment. Some are urging cafés and retailers to drop the brand, while others are vowing never to buy Lumeva coffee again. Customers are posting screenshots of themselves unfollowing the brand, returning coffee subscriptions, and demanding a public apology. Others are debating whether Lumeva can recover from the scandal or if its reputation is irreparably damaged. The controversy is escalating rapidly, with major media outlets beginning to cover the growing backlash.</p>	
<p>Amplify condition</p> <p>@JordanKaiGreen  Verified 2.3M followers</p> <p>🕒 Posted 1 hour ago  Caption: I’ve worked with Lumeva in the past. I believed in their message. But after seeing this video of their founder making racist and sexist remarks - it’s clear we can’t look the other way.</p> <p>This kind of behaviour is not a “mistake.” It reveals something deeper about the culture at the brand. I’ve officially cut all ties with Lumeva, and I won’t be promoting or using their products moving forward.</p> <p>If we care about ethical business, we need to hold brands accountable - and that starts by cancelling Lumeva.</p> <p>#CancelLumeva #AccountabilityNow #EthicalOverEmpty</p>	<p>Buffer condition</p> <p>@JordanKaiGreen  Verified 2.3M followers</p> <p>🕒 Posted 1 hour ago  Caption: I’ve seen the clip. The founder’s remarks are offensive, and I completely understand why so many of you are upset. I was shocked too.</p> <p>But I want to share something from my own experience. Over the last few years, I’ve worked closely with Lumeva’s team—from the growers to the sustainability staff - and I’ve seen their real commitment to inclusion and ethical practices.</p> <p>One person’s failure shouldn’t erase the work of so many others trying to do the right thing. I believe in accountability, but also in growth. For now, I’m choosing to continue supporting Lumeva, and I’ll be watching how they respond and learn from this.</p> <p>#EthicsInAction #HoldAndHeal #Lumeva</p>
<p>👍 134,219 likes  View all 6,412 comments  Top comments: @consciouscup: Appreciate the nuance. Hoping the brand listens and grows. @beanandbeyond: These situations are always complex. Glad you’re speaking up. @brewbalanced: Respect for being clear and taking a stand.</p>	<p>👍 134,219 likes  View all 6,412 comments  Top comments: @consciouscup: Appreciate the nuance. Hoping the brand listens and grows. @beanandbeyond: These situations are always complex. Glad you’re speaking up. @brewbalanced: Respect for being clear and taking a stand.</p>

Appendix 2. Study 3 scenarios

<p>Peer, Amplify @Jamiel ☕ Coffee enthusiast 568 followers</p> <p>● Posted 1 hour ago 📄 Caption: I've been a loyal Lumeva customer for years. I believed in what they stood for. But after watching that video of their founder making racist and sexist comments, I can't keep supporting them.</p> <p>This isn't just a slip-up. It shows a serious problem with who they are as a company. I won't be buying from them again. If we want better from brands, we must call this out. Lumeva crossed the line. They need to be held accountable, and that means cancelling them.</p> <p>#CancelLumeva #HoldBrandsAccountable #NoExcuse</p> <p>❤️ 87 likes 🗨️ View all 32 comments 🗨️ Top comments: @consciouscup: Appreciate the nuance. Hoping the brand listens and grows. @beanandbeyond: These situations are always complex. Glad you're speaking up. @brewbalanced: Respect for being clear and taking a stand</p>	<p>Influencer, Amplify @JordanKaiGreen ✅ Verified 2.3M followers</p> <p>🕒 Posted 1 hour ago 📄 Caption: I've been a loyal Lumeva customer for years. I believed in what they stood for. But after watching that video of their founder making racist and sexist comments, I can't keep supporting them.</p> <p>This isn't just a slip-up. It shows a serious problem with who they are as a company. I won't be buying from them again. If we want better from brands, we must call this out. Lumeva crossed the line. They need to be held accountable, and that means cancelling them.</p> <p>#CancelLumeva #HoldBrandsAccountable #NoExcuse</p> <p>❤️ 134,219 likes 🗨️ View all 6,412 comments 🗨️ Top comments: @consciouscup: Appreciate the nuance. Hoping the brand listens and grows. @beanandbeyond: These situations are always complex. Glad you're speaking up. @brewbalanced: Respect for being clear and taking a stand.</p>
<p>Peer, Buffer @Jamiel ☕ Coffee enthusiast 568 followers</p> <p>● Posted 1 hour ago 📄 Caption: I saw the video going around about the Lumeva founder's awful remarks, and I won't pretend it's okay. It was offensive and disappointing. But I've also had years of great experiences with this brand, and I know they're made up of more than just one person.</p> <p>People make serious mistakes, and I believe in giving space to learn and change. I'm not cancelling Lumeva. I'm watching to see how they respond, and I hope others will too.</p> <p>#GrowthOverCancellation #AccountabilityMatters #KeepTalking</p> <p>❤️ 87 likes 🗨️ View all 32 comments 🗨️ Top comments: @consciouscup: Important to keep perspective. @beanandbeyond: Thanks for encouraging reflection, not just outrage. @brewbalanced: This feels like a balanced response.</p>	<p>Influencer, Buffer @JordanKaiGreen ✅ Verified 2.3M followers</p> <p>🕒 Posted 1 hour ago 📄 Caption: I saw the video going around about the Lumeva founder's awful remarks, and I won't pretend it's okay. It was offensive and disappointing. But I've also had years of great experiences with this brand, and I know they're made up of more than just one person.</p> <p>People make serious mistakes, and I believe in giving space to learn and change. I'm not cancelling Lumeva. I'm watching to see how they respond, and I hope others will too.</p> <p>#GrowthOverCancellation #AccountabilityMatters #KeepTalking</p> <p>❤️ 134,219 likes 🗨️ View all 6,412 comments 🗨️ Top comments: @consciouscup: Important to keep perspective. @beanandbeyond: Thanks for encouraging reflection, not just outrage. @brewbalanced: This feels like a balanced response.</p>

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