Scroll, Judge, Unfollow: How Audiences Navigate Authenticity and Cancellation

A Thematic Analysis of Authenticity and Cancel Culture on TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how audiences perceive and respond to authenticity and cancel culture within the context of beauty influencer content on platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. While authenticity has become a central marker of credibility and commercial viability in influencer culture, it remains a highly contested and performative construct. Similarly, cancel culture functions as a form of digital moral regulation, where audiences collectively hold influencers accountable for perceived violations of authenticity, ethics, or transparency. Despite growing academic attention to influencer strategies and reputational crises, there remains a notable gap in understanding how audiences themselves interpret, negotiate, and react to these dynamics, particularly within feminized digital spaces. To address this gap, this research draws on 11 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with young women aged 20–25 who regularly engage with beauty influencers. Using reflexive thematic analysis, this study identifies key themes related to how participants define and detect authenticity, how they respond to sponsorships and perceived commercialism, and how they engage with or disengage from influencers following moments of controversy. Findings indicate that authenticity is understood as both emotional sincerity and aesthetic consistency yet is often recognized as a carefully constructed performance. Participants described forms of strategic engagement, trust regulation, and disengagement shaped by parasocial relationships, brand alignment, and moral expectations. Notably, responses to cancel culture were highly contextual, shaped by perceived severity of the transgression, influencer response, and broader gendered dynamics of scrutiny. The study contributes to influencer scholarship by centering the audience as an active agent in shaping digital reputations and moral boundaries. It deepens theoretical understandings of authenticity as performativity and cancel culture as participatory moral discourse, offering insights into the emotional, ethical, and cultural dimensions of audience-influencer relations in contemporary digital life.

KEYWORDS: *Authenticity, Cancel Culture, Audience Perceptions, Parasocial Relationships*

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The rise of social media influencers has significantly reshaped the digital cultural landscape, transforming how individuals consume content, engage with public figures, and make purchasing decisions. Among these influencers, beauty content creators (who specialize in makeup tutorials, skincare advice, and product endorsements) (Bishop, 2019, p. 2601; Feasey, 2024, p. 122) have emerged as central figures in digital economies of visibility and consumption. As platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube become primary sites for brand engagement and identity performance, authenticity has become a key marker of influencer credibility and commercial success (Feasey, 2024, p. 121). Beauty influencers are thus expected to navigate a delicate balance: They must appear both aspirational and relatable, polished yet "real," creating a form of strategic self-presentation that resonates with followers (Duffy et al., 2022, p. 1659).

However, this emphasis on authenticity is deeply entangled with broader sociocultural discourses, particularly around cancel culture, in which public figures are held accountable (often collectively and digitally) for perceived transgressions. Beauty influencers are frequently subject to intense scrutiny, especially when their behaviours are seen as violating the expectations of authenticity, transparency, or moral conduct (Duffy et al., 2022, p. 1659). Public backlash can result from seemingly minor inconsistencies, such as undisclosed sponsorships, use of filters, or past problematic statements, underscoring the precarity of influencer visibility (Ng, 2024, p. 14). This study explores how audiences perceive and evaluate authenticity in this high-stakes environment and investigates how these perceptions influence their engagement with and reactions to beauty influencers in the context of cancel culture. Thus, the research question being: How do audiences' perceptions of authenticity and cancel culture shape their engagement with beauty influencers?

The societal relevance of this research lies in its contribution to broader conversations about trust, accountability, and digital ethics. According to the Digital Marketing Institute (2023 as cited in Thorpe, 2023, para. 3), 86% of women consult social media before making purchasing decisions, revealing the immense power and responsibility beauty influencers hold in shaping consumer behaviour. Simultaneously, 77% of influencers monetizing their content are women (Collabstr, 2023, para. 69), highlighting how financial incentives complicate the notion of authenticity. Influencers must constantly navigate the tension between commercial gain and audience trust, and the consequences of perceived insincerity can be severe. In this context, understanding how audiences detect, interpret, and respond to perceived (in)authenticity becomes essential for comprehending the broader mechanisms of how influencers act online. The tension between their vulnerability and visibility can make or break them when it comes to online culture**.**

As cancel culture continues to evolve as a form to hold influencers digitally accountable, it has

evolved to be a powerful force that can be capable of reshaping reputations and derail careers, and thusly alter public discourse (Norris, 2023, p. 146). Cancel culture, as a concept is widely researched by the likes of Clark (2020, p. 98), Brock (2020, p. 14), and Ng (2022, p. 17) to name a few. However, the impact is widely debated to be either negative or positive. This impact is particularly evident within feminized influencer spaces, such as beauty content, where influencers are not only highly visible but also disproportionately subject to gendered scrutiny (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 13). Audiences, primarily women here, play a crucial role in interpreting influencer behaviour and determining the legitimacy of their content. Which means that their perceptions of beauty influencers are key data to look at. As the construction of the reputation of the influencer, is formed by the discernment the viewer. This research therefore sees the role of the audience not just as passive consumers of media, but as active participants in a larger cultural and moral economy that can be found within digital influencing.

Despite growing scholarly interest in influencer culture and cancel culture, much of the literature remains focused on the influencers themselves; Examining how they craft authentic identities, maintain brand relationships, or manage reputational crises (Banet-Weiser, 2021, p. 13; Feasey, 2024, p, 122). This is all part of influencer culture, but is done within the angle of how their careers are affected, not truly about the lasting affects it can have on the relationship between influencer and viewer. While Reinikainen et al., (2020, p. 281) and Lee and Watkins (2016, p. 5755) explore how para-sociality affects the way an influencer can be perceived by their audience, they lack the exploration of it acting in conjunction with authenticity and cancel culture. Next, while morality and the ways it connects with accountability is investigated (Adams, 2011, p. 227; Cohen, 2010, p. 99; Ng, 2022, p. 17), there is a notable gap in understanding how audiences themselves interpret and engage with influencer controversies, particularly within feminized digital spaces like beauty culture. Moreover, the interplay of authenticity and expectation violations can really change how controversy is perceived (Adams, 2011, p. 227; Burgoon & Hale, 1988, p. 61; Lo et al., 2025, p. 8). This study aims to address this gap by examining audience perceptions and reactions through the lens of performativity theory, audience reception, and digital accountability (Banet-Weiser, 2021, p. 13; Bishop, 2019, p. 2592; Duffy et al., 2022, p. 1660). It also draws on the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994) to better understand how consumers interpret influencer content as simultaneously authentic and promotional, highlighting how this awareness mediates both trust and scepticism within audiences.

Existing studies frequently conceptualize authenticity through the lens of influencer self-presentation or brand alignment, it often relies on content analysis or marketing-driven models (Banet-Weiser, 2022;). These approaches tend to overlook the subjective and emotional experiences of followers as their construction of authenticity and the processing of betrayal of trust can be deeply

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personal. By centering the audience perspective, this research seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of influencer-audience dynamics, and unfold the intricacies of authenticity as social construction. Moreover, cancel culture will be treated as an evolving cultural phenomenon and can therefore be shaped by collective digital behaviour. Ultimately, the study positions cancel culture not as a fixed or reactionary trend, but as an ongoing debate where authenticity, gender, power, and ethics intersect in complex and often contradictory ways.

For the thesis question: "How do audiences' perceptions of authenticity and cancel culture shape their engagement with beauty influencers?", a thematic analysis will be done. The next sections will go as follows: Hereafter will be a theoretical framework in chapter two, in which a thorough study was done to review the necessary frameworks and concepts that underly this research. Next, the methodology section in chapter 3 will explain all the steps that were taken in order for this research to come to be. The sample strategy and sample will be discussed, as well as the data collection and analysis steps that were taken. Lastly, within this section any questions on the reliability and validity within this research will also be answered. Hereafter, the results will be revealed within chapter 4, which will be discussed in themes and related back to the literature review that was done. At last, there will be a conclusion that will wrap up the findings and give suggestions for future research. In here, the difficulties and limitations found during the research will also be considered. The reference list and any extra appendix will be found at the end of this paper, which will include the interview guide, an anonymous data overview, the coding schemata plus code tree and the consent form.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework

To answer the research question "How do audiences' perceptions of authenticity and cancel culture shape their engagement with beauty influencers?", a literature review was done based on the themes of authenticity and cancel culture. Next to that, they will be explored and connected to influencer culture as a whole and the affiliation with the female gender. Thus, discussing how these themes are used throughout discourses within the digital world. First, influencers and the concept of the beauty space within influencing will be explained. Then, authenticity and how it is constructed amongst internet culture will be explored. As stated previously, the subject of gender is very prevalent when it comes to beauty, so that will have its separate section afterwards. To continue, parasocial relationships and how they come to form through the perception of authenticity will be investigated. Lastly, cancel culture, and its' many forms will be inspected and explained within this literature review. Within this section, its origins and definition are important, as well as, its connection to authenticity and parasocial relationships. This section will conclude in the exploration of how cancel culture is enacted and the ways moral capital comes into to play when considering the cancellation of a beauty influencer.

2. 1 Influencers and the upkeep of beauty

To start off this literature review, the definition of what an influencer exactly is must be explored. According to Bishop (2021, p. 1) "Influencers are professional, independent, content creators that work on social media platforms that could cross genres including gaming, gossip, and beauty". Within this study, of course, we focus on the beauty aspect of that statement. Within this study, an social media beauty influencer or beauty 'SMI' (Álvarez-Monzoncillo & Santín, 2022, p. 25; Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 261) will be understood as someone that includes the use of products that can be used or applied to enhance or change one's features (Gilligan & Egan as cited in Kumar, 2023, p. 598).

These influencers function within a highly visual and aesthetic-driven digital culture, where the body (especially the face) acts simultaneously as a site of creative labour and a commodity. The concept of the "Instagram face," popularized by Tolentino (2019, para. 1), underscores how influencer beauty is increasingly defined by Eurocentric features, digital editing, and facial symmetry, contributing to a homogenized standard of attractiveness (Bishop, 2019, p. 2601). They are upholding beauty standards they themselves need to adhere to, as they are all still part of the patriarchy. Within this space, beauty influencers are expected not only to demonstrate technical skill, but also to embody the beauty ideals they promote. This dual expectation leads to heightened scrutiny: their appearance, personality, and lifestyle are continuously evaluated by audiences. As Banet-Weiser

(2021) explains, the influencer economy operates as a feedback loop, where visibility invites critique, and critique becomes part of the labour of building a personal brand (p. 143). While many influencers describe this constant surveillance as emotionally taxing, it is also perceived as a necessary part of the job as it essentially just comes with the territory and is needed for a beauty influencer to be successful.

The importance of beauty influencers can be seen in Bishop's (2019, p. 2601) study on a lifestyle vlogger who occasionally posts videos related to beauty in between her regular content. It was found that a significant increase was seen in her engagement when this content was employed. Often "reaching an audience that was five times the size of her usuals audience" (Bishop, 2019, p. 2601). Thus, showing how prevalent the beauty sector is when it comes to creating content and the demand of beauty content by audiences also being quite high. Banet-Weiser (2012, p. 56), explains this as the post-feministic movement of women and girls alike now becoming "more powerful citizens and consumers". Therefore, online culture is shifting to cater more towards women and their needs. Which, apparently seems to be the beautifying of one's self. Maryam et al. (2021), agree with this sentiment as they explore the ways in which a little pampering can make a women feel empowered (p. 5). They go on to say that it is should be considered a form of self-care and can improve the way one thinks about themselves (p. 6). However, Banet-Weiser denounces this as she notes this perceived empowerment is often still a fantasy and not as clear cut as it seems to be, as the expectations of a women needing to be beautiful still acts as form of oppression within the patriarchy (2012, p. 65).

2. 2 The Construct of Authenticity in Influencer Culture

Authenticity, as a concept within influencer culture, is often framed as a commercially viable construct rather than an inherent personal trait (Hund, 2023, p. 2). Scholars such as Banet-Weiser (2021, p. 14) and Feasey (2024, p. 122) have explored the ways in which influencers strategically perform authenticity to maintain audience engagement while simultaneously adhering to the demands of platform algorithms. Influencers must navigate the paradox of being "relatable" while also embodying aspirational qualities, which can lead to tensions when their constructed personas are perceived as disingenuous (Archer & Robb, 2024, p. 129).

This tension becomes even more pronounced given that many influencers begin their careers as ordinary users. As Turner (2010, p. 12) notes, influencers "play themselves" online, meaning they gain visibility by making their own lives into content. The danger of this visibility, particularly for women in beauty spaces, is that the self becomes the product. Their personalities, aesthetics, values, and even vulnerabilities are packaged and consumed as part of their brand (Bishop, 2019, p. 2591). This transition from everyday user to public persona increases their exposure to critique, making

every action, facial expression, and opinion subject to scrutiny (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 56; Turner, 2010, p. 12).

Within this framework, authenticity is best understood through the lens of performativity (Butler, 2006, p. 174), as something continuously enacted rather than inherently possessed. Influencers must navigate a constant interplay between internal motivation and external audience expectations (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 60). Because authenticity is context-dependent and relational, it is rarely stable; instead, it is shaped by the evolving norms of social media platforms, and the shifting of audience tastes. This helps explain why a perceived crack in the "authentic" persona (such as contradictions, or brand inconsistencies) can provoke backlash (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 86; Edlom, 2020, p. 140). Often, the question becomes not whether an influencer will eventually break from the persona, but whether that break will be judged as a forgivable lapse or seen as an actually cancellable offense by their audience.

Another way to frame this tension is through the concept of **"created authenticity"** (Edlom, 2020). Created authenticity refers to the deliberate curation of moments that appear spontaneous, such as emotional disclosures or behind-the-scenes content, with the aim of deepening parasocial intimacy (p. 140). These performances are often received as sincere by audiences, but their effectiveness relies on the maintenance of this illusion. If an audience member suspects that such moments are calculated, the intimacy is shattered. Though, of course, influencers would never admit to "performing" authenticity, as this would directly undermine its emotional power. As this study explores authenticity within beauty influencers, such scepticism can significantly alter perceptions of trust and influence the way audiences evaluate an influencer's moral and emotional credibility. Ultimately, the performance of authenticity is central to influencer-audience relationships, but it is also inherently fragile. It exists within the feedback loop of performance and perception of the audience and is constantly renewed and re-evaluated by them.

2. 3 Gendered Authenticity and Femininity

Next to that, gendered authenticity, which pertains to the idea of the gendered roles men and women are expected to follow (Duffy et al., 2022, p. 1660), define the rules on how -in this case, female influencers- are expected to present themselves. Thus, meaning that their authenticity slides between "real" and "sincere" womanhood, but cannot reveal the actual realities of what influencer work actually entails such as the behind-the-scenes production and editing (Duffy et al., 2022, p. 1660).

Often, the women who do not walk the gendered authenticity tightrope correctly, are in danger of facing backlash as they do not fall in line with the restrictions their content has put them in (Banet-Weiser, 2021, p. 14). This paradoxical phenomenon shows how realness is both required and

strategically performed amongst women in the beauty space (Edlom, 2020, p. 131). Duffy et al. (2022, p. 1660) argue that female influencers face disproportionate scrutiny regarding their authenticity, particularly in feminized content genres such as beauty and lifestyle. The pressure to appear both "real" and commercially appealing creates an impossible standard, wherein influencers are condemned for using beauty filters yet also criticized for not aligning with dominant beauty ideals. This aligns with broader feminist critiques of the performative nature of authenticity, where women are expected to be effortlessly relatable while maintaining this idealized image (Edlom, 2020, p. 140; McRobbie, 2015, p. 4). Which means, again, that they are expected to perform and uphold a beauty standard, they themselves are teaching others about. Which therefore means that they are in a perpetual cycle of self-checking.

2. 4 Parasocial Relationships and Audience Perception

As stated previously, in the influencer economy, vulnerability is often a double-edged sword. Audiences tend to value emotional openness and personal disclosures, such as stories about mental health struggles, plastic surgery, or insecurities, as markers of relatability and authenticity (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 60). However, there are clear boundaries to how much vulnerability is deemed acceptable. When personal disclosures are perceived as overly curated, or strategically timed, particularly in conjunction with monetized content, they can provoke scepticism within their audiences (Reinikainen et al., 2020, p. 291). Similarly, overtly commercial behaviours, such as excessive brand endorsements or product placements, may lead to accusations of "selling out," diminishing the influencer's perceived authenticity. However, the leniency and grace an influencer receives from their followers, is all based on the report they have previously built with them (Cohen, 2010, p.99).

The affective bond between influencers and their audiences is best understood through the lens of parasocial interaction (PSI) theory, which describes the illusion of mutual intimacy formed between media figures and audiences (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). This theory has been widely applied to the study of social media influencers, as the interactive, self-disclosing nature of their content mimics real-life social exchanges. According to Reinikainen et al. (2020), the conversational tone of influencer videos, especially when paired with emotional self-disclosure, enhances the illusion of friendship and fosters a deeper sense of trust and emotional closeness (p. 281.) Next to that, by looking directly into the camera and speaking to their audience, the illusion of eye-contact may feel like an actual interaction between the influencer and audience member (Reinikainen et al., 2020, p. 282).

The strength of these parasocial relationships (PSRs) often depends on two key factors: attitude homophily and attractiveness (Lee & Watkins, 2016, p. 5755). Attitude homophily refers to

perceived similarity in values, beliefs, and preferences, while attractiveness encompasses both physical appearance and social appeal (Lee & Watkins, 2016, p. 5755). Therefore, Balabanis and Chatzopoulou (2019) found that beauty bloggers perceived as more homophilous were rated as more influential by their followers, suggesting that shared values play a significant role in shaping perceived credibility and influence and their ability to conform to beauty standards can make an influencer more appealing to watch (p. 343). However, these relationships are not uniformly distributed. As Delbaere et al. (2021, p. 103) note, not every viewer experiences the same intensity of connection, and PSRs form in complex and highly individualized ways. Much like offline friendships, these bonds require time and emotional resonance to develop. Within this, consistency is very important. Which means that over repeated encounters, these relationships can deepen. According to Auter (1992, p. 178), PSIs strengthen with each media exposure, eventually leading viewers to perceive the influencer as a genuine part of their daily life. Over time, the influencer becomes "a personal friend," embedded in the rhythms of the viewer's everyday experiences (Auter, 1992, p. 178; Ballentine and Martin, 2005, p. 198).

These emotionally charged relationships then have a direct impact on the influencer's persuasive power. When followers feel personally connected and emotionally invested, they are more likely to trust product recommendations and overlook commercial motives (Wilkie et al., 2022, p. 3504). The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), developed by Friestad and Wright (1994, p. 7), provides a useful framework for understanding how audiences recognize and respond to persuasive intent. According to the model, consumers are not passive recipients of influence; rather, they develop "persuasion knowledge" over time and become increasingly adept at detecting manipulative or insincere tactics (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015, p. 120; Friestad & Wright, 1994, p. 7). Influencers who embed branded content within personal narratives, strategically weaving vulnerability, humour, or authenticity into their promotions, can reduce this resistance and maintain trust. This aligns with Wilkie et al. (2022), who argue that PSRs help mitigate consumer uncertainty about sponsored content, allowing followers to project their trust in the influencer onto the brand being endorsed (p. 3505). Meaning that, it is often beneficial for brands to collaborate with influencers who's branding is based on trust with their viewers, as this potentially could create more sales opportunities.

However, when the commercial intent becomes too overt, this persuasive shield breaks down. Audiences may begin to question the sincerity of the influencer's persona, undermining trust and diminishing the emotional bond. As scepticism grows, so does the potential for backlash and disengagement, which could even lead to cancellation. Particularly, if followers feel they have been manipulated or misled (Ahluwalia & Burnkrant, 2004, p. 39; Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015, p. 111). In this way, the management of PSRs becomes central to an influencer's long-term success, as both authenticity and persuasion rely on the careful curation of the emotional intimacy with their viewers.

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2. 5 Cancel Culture: Origins, Theory, and Dynamics

The beginnings of cancel culture stem from various forms of internet lingo. The reference was historically first made through the boy-cotting and blacklisting within mediated processes (Clark, 2020, p. 89). Meaning that, the antecedent was often based in structures of power in which those at the top such as; Casting directors, producers, admissions officers or donors to college funds could influence the entertainment industries or college campuses (Clark, 2020, p. 89). Though, the act of actually "cancelling" someone has its roots in civil rights movements to do with queer communities of colour (Clark, 2020, p. 89). Clark (2020), credits themself for the coining of the term into an internet meme in 2015 (p. 89). The reference was then picked up by various outside factors, mostly journalists, who could take that term and run with it to amplify their own needs for their personal gain. Brock (2020, p. 14) differentiates the twitter's 'mob mentality', which is what cancelling has come to be known for, from its' actual use. Namely, a critique of systemic inequality. Not to be mistaken with the attack on "individualistic transgressions" (Brock, 2020, p. 14; Clark, 2020, p. 89). While this view on cancel culture is certainly a grand way to perhaps reclaim the concept. It truly no longer fits that box within modern day internet culture.

Cancel culture has been theorized as both a means of social justice and a mechanism of public shaming (Ng, 2022, p. 17). Some scholars, like Norris (2023), argue that cancel culture enforces accountability for influencers and public figures who engage in unethical behaviour, reinforcing societal norms around inclusivity and appropriate conduct (p. 146). However, others highlight the problematic nature of cancel culture, particularly in how it can lead to disproportionate consequences for individuals based on viral outrage rather than a structured system of justice (Duffy et al., 2022, p. 1671). The spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 43; Norris, 2023, p. 152) suggests that individuals fearing social ostracization may become hesitant to express dissenting views, which can contribute to the amplification of dominant narratives as straying from the status quo has seen to be increasing the rapid spread of cancellations. Lo et al. (2025, p. 1), similarly, see cancel culture as negative spiral that is used to exclude celebrities and online personas when their behaviours trigger communities who they have wronged. They frame the public as using cancel culture to use public shaming as a way to preserve the well-being of the status quo on social media (p.1). However, in their study of morality, they admit that the cancelling attitudes do depend on what the controversial event is, and is not always without reason (p. 8). To give an opposite perspective from Clark (2020, p. 89), they reiterate that journalists, politicians, celebrities, everyday people and even academics have created the narrative that being cancelled is now no longer about morality but rather harm. Thus, putting a "neo-logic twist" on what the practice previously was and therefore create an obviously negative fear of censorship that is now associated with cancelling (p. 89). Alluding

to the fact that cancel culture has been twisted in ways, that its' original purpose can no longer be recognized. By doing so, the cancelled can dodge their punishment by deflecting the focus and anger of the masses.

2. 6 Cancel Culture in the Beauty Influencer Sphere

The impact of cancel culture on social media influencers is multifaceted and often unpredictable. While some influencers experience short-term backlash and quickly regain their standing, others suffer long-term reputational damage that can lead to follower loss, brand partnership terminations, or even complete withdrawal from the public eye (Ng, 2024, p. 15; Norris, 2023, p. 146). Social media platforms facilitate these dynamics by enabling rapid audience mobilization and visibility. Simultaneously, these same platforms also allow for damage control; the performative affordances of Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube enable influencers to issue public apologies, rebrand their identities, or even leverage controversy to maintain engagement and relevance (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 62).

The burden of cancel culture falls especially hard on women influencers, who are frequently held to contradictory and gendered standards of authenticity and morality. Duffy et al. (2022) argue that female influencers are policed more harshly for their emotional expression, aesthetic presentation, and perceived sincerity. Their authenticity is more heavily scrutinized, and any deviation from idealized femininity, whether in the form of perceived vanity, dishonesty, or just simply having commercial ambition, is more likely to be framed as a moral failing (p. 1659). Antifandom spaces like *Get Off My Internets* (GOMI) serve as digital forums where these gendered surveillances play out. These communities often focus their critique on female influencers, dissecting their language, parenting choices, appearance, and consumption habits in ways that reinforce unrealistic and patriarchal standards of public femininity (Duffy et al. 2022, p. 1660). This phenomenon could be explained by Traister (2018, p. 442), who suggests that this is due to women often feeling powerless and therefore turning their anger sideways to other women.

As stated previously, there is a certain paradox that arises within influencer culture. The very qualities that make influencers successful, their relatability, vulnerability, and accessibility, can become liabilities when inconsistencies arise. As Banet-Weiser (2021) argues, influencers are celebrated for appearing real and approachable, but the moment their behaviour deviates from audience expectations, those same traits become evidence of inauthenticity or manipulation (p. 143).

This is then connected to the parasocial relationship which are formed through the continuous engagement with self-disclosing influencers (Delbaere et al., 2021, p. 101). As the mental friendship develops, expectations are made of their behaviour (Burgoon & Hale, 1988, p. 61), and violations of those expectations can often hit harder as it is "a failure to live up to the idea of what a

friend should do" (Davis & Todd, 1985, p. 32). Meaning that, the more a beauty influencer creates parasocial bonds with their audiences, the harder they will receive pushback once their mistakes become public. Though, Cohen (2010, p. 99) does note that the level of expectation does depend on the level of relationship that is formed. Not every friendship a person makes, holds the same weight, and therefore a viewer can often have different morality clauses and expectations of different influencers. Thus, the reaction from the public often also has to do with the branding that an influencer has marketed themselves with.

High-profile cases within the beauty influencer community illustrate these tensions clearly. For example, James Charles faced allegations of misconduct that led to widespread public backlash, the severing of major sponsorships, and a significant drop in followers. While he attempted to regain trust through apology videos and temporary absences from social media, the long-term effects on his brand were significant but were not as grand as they perhaps should have been as the allegations were surrounding minors. However, he has always been seen as quite controversial on the internet, meaning that the expectations made based on his behaviour were not as grand. In contrast, Mikayla Nogueira, a beauty influencer known for her candid product reviews, faced backlash after allegedly promoting a product in a misleading way. The controversy centered not only on the product itself, but on perceived betrayal of audience trust, as her brand was built on honesty and relatability. This demonstrates that the severity of cancellation is shaped by both the nature of the transgression and the perceived alignment (or misalignment) between the influencer's actions and their constructed persona (Cohen, 2010, p. 99)

2. 7 Audience Role in Policing Authenticity and Morality

In the context of influencer culture, audiences are not passive spectators but active moral agents who play a significant role in shaping influencer reputations and visibility (Lo et al. 2025, p. 1). Through likes, comments, shares, blocks, and call-outs, followers contribute to the rise and fall of digital figures (Ng, 2022, p. 16) . Banet-Weiser (2021) emphasizes that the influencer economy relies on this participatory model (p. 143), this is where audience engagement not only fuels the algorithm but also functions as a form of governance (shaping who gets attention, who is held accountable, and who is excluded from the public eye). This means that, within influencer culture, the audiences are the forces to be reckoned with when accountability needs to be taken. As Lo et al. (2025, p. 1), previously has stated, the public tries to protect its' social media platforms by deliberate boy-cotting or disengaging with online personas. In this sense, the viewers become sort of vigilantic actors who take on fighting injustice for hurt communities on the internet.

Adams (2011, p. 227) explains this as the a form of moral capital in which the condemning of actions on the internet stems from how the individual will be viewed. Though, originally explained through a political lens in their study, the concept of moral capital still applies to today's internet culture as its' core pertains to how someone is viewed through their actions in the media. However, moral capital must not be mistaken with having actual morality as this is only done to save face and keep social standing online (Adams, 2011, p. 237).

This dynamic of having a moral capital becomes particularly salient when audiences also feel emotionally invested in an influencer's persona. As parasocial relationships deepen in conjunction with the expectancy of their behaviours (Burgoon & Hale, 1988, p. 61), viewers often develop a sense of ownership over the influencer's narrative and brand (Lo et al. 2025, p. 8). As the expectations could be betrayed through inauthenticity, viewers may respond with critique or disengagement, but also with collective action. In this way, parasocial relationships (PSRs) can become a driving force behind moral policing, especially when followers feel that their trust has been betrayed. Though, the act of cancelling, should not be seen solely as punitive. It often represents a form of community regulation and a means by which audiences attempt to reclaim power within a media landscape dominated by commercialization. By withdrawing support, calling out behaviour, or publicly demanding accountability, followers participate in a symbolic economy of morality. In this sense, the concept of cancel culture being about power has historically stayed the same. Though it previously was in the hands of the elite (Clark, 2020, p. 89), it now has become a form of social justice and a powerful way for viewers to reclaim that power and shame those that are at the top.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In order to answer the research question of This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore how audiences perceive the role of authenticity in influencer culture and its impact on engagement with cancel culture. Given the subjective nature of authenticity and audience perceptions, qualitative methods allow for in-depth exploration of personal attitudes, experiences, and interpretations. In order to fulfil this research, interviews have been conducted with viewers of beauty content. Within interviews, the participants are seen as meaning makers as we can derive interpretations through hearing them talk (Warren, 2001, p. 83). As this research seeks for information commonly considered as personal matters, which means that their own personal engagement online is to be inspected, an in-depth conversation will gain a more thorough understanding of the values and decisions the participants make (Johnson, 2001, p. 104). This is done specifically considering their attitudes and habits surrounding online culture.

3. 1 Sample and Sampling Strategy

The study uses a mix of purposive and snowball sampling strategy, targeting women between the ages of 18 to 25 who actively engage with beauty influencer content on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. This demographic was selected because young women are both key audiences for beauty content and highly active participants in online discourses around influencer authenticity and cancellation (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 13; Bishop, 2019, p. 2601). Participants were recruited through social media platforms such Reddit, TikTok, Instagram, and university WhatsApp group chats to ensure diversity in perspectives and experiences.

A total of 11 women were interviewed who adhered to the criteria of: Identifying as female, between the ages of 18 to 25 and must be using social media platforms such as YouTube, Tiktok or Instagram. Lastly, as a criteria, it was also important that they watched some form of beauty content weekly to ensure the participants were consuming enough material to discuss during the interviews.

The eleven participants' nationalities ranged from European countries like; The Netherlands, The United Kingdom, Portugal and Poland, and also went as far as the United States and Argentina. All participants have completed high school and were at various stages of getting higher education degrees like bachelor's or master's degrees, with one outlying participant that was working on a MBO diploma. Three of the interviews were done in Dutch and translated, while the others were all done in English. An anonymous overview of the participants can be found within Appendix A: Anonymous Participant Overview. And an example of the recruitment message can be seen within Appendix B: Recruitment Message.

While nine of the participants were recruited by responding to the above message, two of the women joined the study through snowball sampling as two previous participants sent the message through to a friend they knew would also fit the criteria and could possibly be interested in joining the research, which they indeed ended up being.

3. 2 Informed consent and ethical considerations

All participants have received a written informed consent form prior to their interview which can be found in Appendix F: Consent Form. This form included: A clear explanation of the study purpose and methods, and the information on their right to withdraw their consent at any point and stop participating in the study. Next to that, they also were able to skip any questions they preferred not to answer and they were assured that their data would be fully anonymized and how and where it is stored. All participants have given their consent for their interview to be recorded and used for research. Not all have done so through the consent form, but have made sure to do so at the start of their interviews orally.

For this research, audio recordings were used and stored on the password-protected drive of my personal laptop, accessible only to me as the researcher and my supervisor. Transcripts were anonymized, removing all personal identifiers. Participants also had the option to review and edit their transcripts, ensuring they retained control over their data, but none felt necessary to do so. Lastly, they were also provided with contact details of the thesis coordinators and supervisors for any follow-up questions and concerns that they might have.

3. 3 Interview Format and Duration

Each interview was conducted online and done through either Zoom or Teams. They lasted for approximately 45-75 minutes, depending how much the participant was willing to share. The duration allowed for sufficient time to cover all key themes while maintaining participant comfort and engagement.

3.4 Operationalization of Key Themes and Example Questions

To operationalize the key themes of this study, the concepts of authenticity, cancel culture, and gendered expectations were translated into measurable elements within the qualitative interview process. Authenticity was defined based on audience perceptions of influencers' genuineness, transparency, and consistency in their content, exploring factors such as self-disclosure, aesthetic choices, and promotional practices (Archer & Robb, 2024, p. 129; Banet-Weiser, 2022, p. 13; Hund, 2023, p. 2). Given that influencer authenticity is often strategically performed rather than inherently possessed, the questions assessed how the participants recognized and evaluated

perceived realness (Banet-Weiser, 2022, p. 13) and how important authenticity was for their own viewing pleasure.. Cancel culture was operationalized through participants' descriptions of influencer controversies, their reactions to public backlash, and the criteria they used to determine whether an influencer deserved cancellation (Ng, 2022, p. 17; Norris, 2023, p. 146) Next to that, they were questioned on how they themselves perceived cancel culture. Participants were specifically asked about their decision-making processes when withdrawing support from an influencer and whether they viewed cancel culture as a mechanism of accountability or a form of excessive punishment (Duffy et al., 2022, p. 1671). The gendered expectations were examined by probing whether participants perceived female beauty influencers were subjected to different authenticity standards than their male counterparts, given the heightened scrutiny placed on women's self-presentation and perceived sincerity online (Duffy et al., 2022, p. 1660; McRobbie, 2015, p. 4). Not all participants had knowledge about this, but if interested did talk about their opinions and expectations on the gendered differences for men and women within internet culture.

The interview guide was semi-structured, which allowed for flexibility while ensuring key themes were covered. Thematic analysis was then be used to identify recurring patterns in audience perceptions, allowing for a deeper understanding of how these key themes interact in shaping engagement with beauty influencers. The thematic areas with the operational definition and corresponding questions can be found below, (see *Table 1.*). As the interviews were done through semi-structured interviews, not all follow up questions have been included, as they weren't exactly the same across the board, the full interview guide can be found in Appendix C: Interview Guide.

Table 1

Themes of interview guide

Theme	Operational definition	Reflection in analysis/questions
Introduction	Methodological questions and interest in beauty	Could you briefly introduce yourself?
		How would you describe your interest in beauty influencers?
		Which platforms do you use to follow them?
		How often do you engage with beauty influencer content?
		What makes a beauty influencer stand out to you?

Authenticity	Audience perception of influencers' genuineness, transparency, and consistency.	Questions about what makes influencers seem "real", how authenticity is signalled, and why it matters:
		Could you explain in your own words, what authenticity means to you?
		What makes an influencer feel authentic to you?
		How do you decide whether someone is being authentic or not?
		Can you describe a beauty influencer you find particularly authentic or inauthentic? What about them gives you that impression?
		Have you personally ever felt disappointed or betrayed by an influencer? What happened?
Cancel culture	Audience perceptions of public backlash, callouts, and influencer accountability	Questions about how participants react to controversies, who deserves cancellations, and what fair accountability looks like:
		Have you seen a beauty influencer you follow face public backlash? What happened?
		What topics or behaviours do you think can trigger backlash?
		Do you think influencers are more likely to get cancelled for personal behaviours or for business-related controversies (e.g., misleading product reviews)?
		Do you believe cancelled influencers deserve the backlash they receive? Why or why not?
		What response should a cancelled influencer give?
		Do you think cancel culture actually has a purpose/works? Why or why not

Personal Engagement	Audience decisions to support, unfollow, or publicly critique influencers after controversies	Questions about when and why participants stop following influencers, and how they talk about cancellations online:
		If you were to notice a beauty influencer you follow to be inauthentic, what would your following actions be?
		When an influencer you follow is being cancelled, what are your actions during this?
		If an influencer were to regain your trust or follow after they had previously lost it, what would that look like to you? Could you give me some examples of when this has happened?
		How does the reputation the influencer had before the controversy come into play for you?
		How do you come to form your opinion on an influencer when they are being cancelled?
		When you come across content from an influencer that is being cancelled, how do you treat this content? What are your following actions?
Gendered expectations	Awareness of heightened scrutiny applied to female beauty influencers	Direct questions about whether female beauty influencers are judges more harshly than male influencers:
		Do you ever see an difference between cancellation of men and women? Could you give me an example?

Reflective	How important is the authenticity of an beauty influencer for you to follow and watch their content? Why is that?
	How can the way an influencer engages with their audience influence how authentic they seem?
	When influencers are presenting themselves online, what are your thoughts on the constant feedback loop that they are receiving?
	If you were to think about all the influencers in different fields or industries, (e.g., gaming, fitness, or tech) what similarities and differences could you think of when it comes to authenticity between that type of influencing and the beauty space?

3.5 Data Collection and Analysis

A thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79) was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns within the interview data. This approach was suitable as it allowed for flexible, iterative coding, enabling me to capture both expected themes (linked to existing theory) and unexpected insights that emerged from participant responses based on emergent themes related to authenticity, audience expectations, and responses to cancel culture.

The thematic analysis was done according to the main steps found within Braun and Clarke (2006). First off, the familiarization with the data was done as all interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed alongside recordings to ensure accuracy and immersion. The transcribing was initially done through the transcription tools offered by both Zoom and Teams, and was then corrected when needed. Notes were made during this process to identify initial impressions and potential areas of interest. Listening back to the audio helped ensure that tone, hesitations, and emphases were also taken into account. Then, initial coding was done. The transcripts were open-coded to capture recurring ideas, language, and concepts related to authenticity, transparency, emotional expression, influencer behaviour, and audience reactions. This stage included both deductive codes (e.g., "sponsored content," "parasocial relationships," "cancel culture") informed by the literature, and inductive codes that emerged organically (e.g., "capitalism fatigue," "vibe check," "blocking vs. scrolling"). Then a theme review was done. The codes were put into broader candidate themes that reflected shared ideas or patterns across interviews. For example, codes relating to trust,

consistency, and relatability were grouped under "Performances of Authenticity." Similarly, moral judgments, critique styles, and responses to controversies were grouped under "Cancel Culture and Digital Morality. As they were defined and named within the research, they were also linked back to the research question and theoretical framework. Thus, the data was interpreted and related to the existing literature in order to highlight how audiences' understandings of authenticity and cancel culture influence their engagement with beauty influencers. Illustrative quotes were selected to highlight each theme. These then were woven into the narrative to ground the findings in participants' lived experiences and connect them back to the conceptual framework.

3.6 Reliability and validity

Validity in the context of this research refers to the accuracy and credibility of the findings, whether they truly represent the perspectives of participants and address the research question. In order to strengthen validity, the semi-structured interviews were done to allow participants to express their views in depth while maintaining consistency across interviews. The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 79) six-phase approach, which promotes transparency and ensures that codes and themes are clearly grounded in the data. A codebook was created to promote reliability as it stemmed from the literature and initial themes that emerged from the research, which can be found in Appendix D: Codebook. This gave a consistent aid to selecting codes and defining themes for the result chapter. A code tree was made to give visual aid of the themes that were found, which can be seen in Appendix E: Code Tree.

Chapter 4: Results and discussion

This chapter presents and interprets the main themes that emerged from interviews with eleven women aged 18 to 25 who regularly engage with beauty influencer content on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. Drawing on the thematic analysis and theoretical framework, the chapter discusses how audience perceptions of authenticity and cancel culture shape engagement with beauty influencers. The themes found and discussed her are: (1) Performances of Authenticity, (2) Sponsorship and Consumer Expectations, (3) Cancel Culture and Digital Morality, (4) Gendered Double Standards, (5) Parasocial Relationships and Viewer Responsibility, and ultimately (6) Engagement and Disengagement.

4.1 Performances of Authenticity

Participants consistently equated authenticity with honesty, openness, and relatability. However, they also acknowledged the paradox that social media is inherently curated, making complete authenticity difficult to recognize. For instance, Participant 1 stated, *"Social media's very curated. And so I don't think you can find the authenticity in social media that you look for in real life"*. Another participant, Participant 2, said; *"The basic, and I guess the simplest answer would be like staying true to themselves, which is difficult to perceive on the internet because you don't know this person".* Overall, authenticity was defined as being "*real*", but when asked how the participants could distinguish how they could perceive this, it always watered down to a "feeling". For example, as Participant 3 states: *"I feel like a lot of the time you can kind of just tell from a person's, like, mannerisms if they're being, like, forced and being, like, really bubbly and overly conversational and kind of like in your face on the screen".* Within this research, these were already the first signs of how subjective cancelment and engagement with beauty influencers could be.

The interviewees distinguished between different dimensions of authenticity: emotional honesty, consistency in tone/persona, aesthetic originality, and transparency about sponsorships or personal struggles. Influencers who maintained the same personality across platforms and were open about personal hardships were often perceived as authentic. Madeline White and NikkieTutorials were cited as examples of influencers who remained consistent and "real" over time. *"she has struggles that she's been honest with, and she does so enthusiastically"* (Participant 1, about Madeline White). "*I don't know this person in real life, but the way she comes across in her videos is the same as she comes across in other programs or snippets I've seen of her."* (Participant 2, about NikkieTutorials). In these instances, both participants also cited that they had known and watched them for quite a while, which incited a loyalty and therefore feeling of kinship with them.

While emotional honesty and openness was praised. "*I love the raw and rough parts of an*

influencer as well like, if they are, for example, too perfect constantly, this also feels a little plastic, a little produced, a lot less real" (Participant 4). It was often stated that influencers were not expected to share their lives with us. On numerous occasions, interviewees acknowledged that beauty influencers, while seemingly authentic, did not have to share any of their personal struggles, and that we as audiences also were not owed those struggles from them either. Participant 1 stated, *"I also think that I don't necessarily expect authenticity in social media",* Similarly, Participant 9 said "*I just think that, in terms of influencers, we do have to remember that private and work is just separate*", though Participant 7 voiced, "*Look, we really don't have to share everything. I also understand not wanting to put everything on the internet, but if an influencer is very closed about who he or she is. Then I already feel like they are less authentic with their audience, with their following and the people that are watching*".

In this, Participant 7 seemingly has encompassed many of the other participants thoughts. Meaning that, while audiences recognize the boundary that is between audience and influencer, they simultaneously and contradictory, do like it when the people they are watching self-disclose about their personal lives. This aligns with Edlom's (2020, p. 140) concept of created authenticity in which these performances create a feeling of realness from the influencer.

Some participants were wary of influencers who adopted trendy styles or buzzwords to increase visibility, describing such behaviours as "forced" or "performative." Participant 4 commented, "*If somebody is going to use some buzzwords like 'blueberry milk makeup'. I'm not going to look at that. I feel like in beauty all of those things just make everything so standardized and it kills creativity in my opinion. People should be able to do whatever they want. So whenever an influencer tries to imitate that, it hinders my engagement*"**.** From a theoretical standpoint, this might be because the following of trends goes against originality and therefore makes an influencer seem like they have no personal brand of their own. Which, according to Banet-Weiser (2021, p.143) is highly appreciated amongst influencers and viewers. Next to that, the interviewee's heightened scrutiny of influencers' just simply acting within the constraints that the algorithm puts on them, shows how beauty influencers are often pressured to be real, but apparently are not allowed to commercialize themselves (Duffy et al., 2022, p. 1660; Edlom, 2020, p. 140).

All-in-all, while participants valued authenticity, they also did recognize that it is a strategic performance in the influencer economy and therefore no participant wanted to state that they would expect perfect authenticity and behaviour online. Some going as far saying that they even expected beauty influencers to lie to viewers or be fake. "*It's their lifestyle, but they curate their lifestyle. So it's like a lie by omission. I expect that of people.*" (Participant 1). With Participant 6 similarly stating: "*I feel like it's honestly, really hard in the beauty industry because I feel like a lot of them are really*

******* *fake*". The many controversies that have surrounded the beauty community have therefore created an aura of scepticism for the participants.

4.2 Sponsored Content and Consumer Trust

Participants were highly aware of persuasive intent in influencer marketing, aligning with Friestad and Wright's (1994) Persuasion Knowledge Model (p. 7). Moreover, sponsored content was often met with scepticism unless it aligned with the influencer's persona and aesthetic. With Participant 1 noting, "*When I see something is an ad, I do lose interest quite quickly*". And Participant 7 saying: "*At some point it just feels like a sales pitch. That's advertising, too. If I wanted to see that I would turn on the television".* However, a sponsorship was not automatically disqualifying. Participants emphasized the importance of transparency and consistency. Participant 3 said, "*I don't have any issues with it as long as they follow the law in making it clear that it is sponsored content*". Next to that, most interviewees acknowledged that sponsorships are just a part of the job for them as Participant 3 went on to say "*I'm fairly neutral just because, like, I do understand that influencers, like, making content is their job and obviously kind of sponsorships are how that is a profitable job that they can kind of live off*". Participant 2 voiced, "*I'm not completely against it. 'cause at the end, like these people also need to make their money and this is what they're doing it with*". Overall, at this point, it is seems to be that the participants expected of most influencers to partake in sponsorships as there was an understanding amongst them that, while doing your makeup on camera and sharing your life with an audience is not a "typical" job, it is still a job. Therefore, to make money, advertising to their audience was deemed acceptable.

Though this did come with the clause that influencers were expected to take on sponsorships that actually fit with their brand. "*If they really stand behind the products, then it's fine*" (Participant 5). It seemed there was nothing quite as inauthentic for the interviewees, than influencers who just took on any sponsorship will-nilly. "*Yeah, look, they also just have to make a living, so I understand that they do a sponsored post, but I do think that they shouldn't do it too often as an influencer. Because it does read a little bit like, they don't have their own opinion within authenticity, so to speak. Because if you only post sponsored stuff, you're not actually posting your own opinion, because If you're sponsored, then you just have to pretend that you really like it, when maybe you don't.*" (Participant 7). Pi, had a similar view "*you can see the persons... the people that are just doing it for money, like I don't want to see that person as often anymore*". Meaning that, while the participants could acknowledge that sponsorships are indeed about making extra money, doing it just for the money would be too insincere and therefore makes those influencers look like they were just cash grabbing and sell-outs.

Notably, the backlash against Mikayla Nogueira for changing her opinion on a product post-

sponsorship was cited multiple times. Both Participant 1 and Participant 2 described it as a loss of trust, with Participant 1 stating, "*You lied about what your entire platform is based on*". This case was about influencer Mikayla, who previously had done a review of a mascara on her page, in which she spoke negatively about it. However, a few months later, she received a sponsorship for this mascara and seemed to have changed her tune about the product as she spoke quite positively and recommended it to her followers. Moreover, her new "review" of the mascara also included false advertisement as she used fake lashes to make the effect the mascara was giving slightly better, and she did not disclose this while doing the advertisement. This all together, caused her to receive a lot of backlash from her audience and therefore loose quite a bit of trust from her followers. Even Participant 2, who did not particularly follow or know Mikayla well, heard about the drama online and decided to disengage with her when seeing her videos on her own social media. "*I don't know if I followed her, but if I did then I probably did unfollow her. 'cause. I don't see her content as much now, and also I would swipe away when I would see her because I was like, this is not for me*".

Overall, trust in influencer advertising depended not only on disclosure but also on perceived sincerity and alignment with the influencer's previously stated values. This demonstrates how authenticity and commercial activity are deeply entangled, and perceived violations of trust can disrupt engagement. However, the level of betrayal felt amongst the participants did not quite go as far as the persuasion model by Friestad and Wright (1994, p. 7) and Colliander and Erlandsson (2015, p. 120) would have suggested. As the model itself is quite old, and indeed it does acknowledge how often audiences learn the persuasion techniques that are employed by influencers, what should be noted here is that we are in a new day and age on the internet since those articles have come out. Meaning that, advertisement is often so ingrained within our social media's expectations surrounding sponsorships, that reactions to learning about being persuaded are not quite as harsh as they used to be. Participant 4 does note, "*most of the time it's like you're watching something and then you realize it's promotional content and sponsored content and you're like whoa it's just… kind of a little bit ruined for me. I felt like I was watching something nice and fun, and engaging, and whatever I like. And I realized I am in this capitalistic circle that I am being pushed products constantly and cannot catch a break from all the commercials*". So while learning they are being targeted is disappointing to them, the overall consensus was that they already expect that they will be seeing advertisements once they go onto social media. "*as I'm growing older, obviously, I'm becoming more aware of the tactics people use to kind of sell themselves, or sell whatever it is they're selling*" (Participant 8). It seems that their bigger concern would actually happen to be that it is a push for capitalism, as Participant 1 similarly voices, "*I try not to engage too much with consumerism and I think then when something is an ad, it is pushing for consumerism*".

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4.3 Cancel Culture and Digital Morality

Participants held complex and ambivalent views on cancel culture. Many saw it as necessary for accountability but criticized its excesses and performativity. Participant 3 said, "*Cancel culture is damaging. People will go off on a whim and start these kind of hate campaigns".* This follows similar patterns already seen within the literature review as Lo et al. (2025, p. 1) and Norris (2023, p. 146), suggest that cancel culture is crowded with negativity.

Others like Participant 4 made a distinction between being cancelled and being corrected: "*If somebody is being cancelled for bad behaviour, I don't think that's getting cancelled. I think that's being corrected".* Similarly Participant 8 said: "*It definitely works, and I feel like it should exist. I don't think it should be something that… should be ignored, because some people need to be held accountable*". While, Participant 6 voiced: "*I hate cancel culture because, I'm like, where is the nuance*?", indicating how often cancellation does not allow for in-depth explanations. Participant 6, in this case, was one of the few participants who actually voiced real disdain for cancel culture, as she felt it was often taken too far, and therefore never worked. She goes on to say that because cancelling gets taken too far, it will create a wave of sympathy for the influencer who is being attacked. Thus, the focus of the cancelling shifts and the level of accountability is lost along the way. Though, other participants like Participant 5 noted; "*I do think that it's good to stand behind your own morals and if someone is doing something that's not OK to really address that as a community".* Though, cancel culture can often be found in spaces where the participants felt like it was unnecessary. Participant 5 goes on to say; "*One person does one thing wrong and he or she gets cancelled. So sometimes it's too big, I think*". Hate speech, doxxing or death threats were never okay, and also not considered truly part of cancel culture by many of the interviewees. Here, similar to what Clarke (2020, p. 89) and Brock (2020, p. 14) call out, is the inherent name of it being "cancelling someone" no longer fits what these women are talking about in their interviews. While this theme still pertains to cancel culture as a whole, large parts of it were condemned as all the participants felt morally obligated to distinguish between cancelling and holding someone accountable.

The participants identified multiple factors influencing whether a cancellation was deemed valid. This included the severity of the offense, recurrence, public response, and the influencer's reaction. Serious offenses such as racism or sexual misconduct were viewed as justifiable grounds for backlash, as every single participant mentioned when asked about what they think triggers backlash the most, was along the lines of: "*When people go on racist rants, misogynistic rants, homophobic rants.*" (Participant 1), or "*Anything like obviously illegal or that's like, kind of clearly morally wrong.*" (Participant 3), and further "*If you're not being inclusive. If you're being derogatory, discriminatory, all these things.*" (Participant 4). These offenses were often seen as "unforgivable", as they go against a

moral compass that the participants all seemed to have and in these cases cancelment was deemed as deserving. While it is definitely believable that these women felt like these actions went against tkumarheir own morality, it should be noted that the concept of moral capital does play a part here (Adams, 2011, p. 227). Though, through these interviews, they would never admit to it, it does pull into question whether them condemning those actions could also simply be because of the moral capital it gains them in front me as the interviewer. Only one participant admitted to conforming to online sentiment based on what moral capital expected when asked if she would unfollow a controversial influencer. "*The only reason that would happen is like if I were to have unfollowed them because I didn't want to be judged so like I wouldn't unfollow them because I actually thought they did something wrong or I don't like them anymore. But just because I felt like other people would judge me for it. So then I would probably follow them again if that like all calmed down. But I haven't done that 'cause. It's never that big of a deal to me*" (Participant 6).

Apologies were expected, "*An apology is a nice place to start*" (Participant 1), but only if deemed sincere. Performative apologies, particularly those involving crying without clear accountability, were criticized. Participant 4 remarked, "*Don't cry in front of the camera without any clarification".* Often times, the main desire within cancelment amongst the participants would be for an influencer to be held accountable give personal explanations where and why they went wrong. Participant 7 going as far as saying, "*Yeah look, they can just make these sorry videos, but nobody believes that. I think they just need to show that they want to change and just really make sure to prevent it next time.*". Accountability, in this sense would be for beauty influencers to recognize where they went wrong, apologize for the upset, and make steps to improve their behaviour onward. Though most of the participants did say that second chances should be given to everyone, so a true "cancellation" in that sense was never really possible nor acceptable. Paradoxically, similar to academics, the interviewees often switched back and forth between thinking cancel culture was a positive or a negative. While the idea of making someone say sorry for their action and even going as far as supporting the deplatformatization of someone was supported, all the bells and whistles that come with the drama, tears, and hate were not appealing parts of it.

This, therefore, reflects Norris's (2023, p. 146) assertion that cancel culture operates as both moral regulation and public spectacle. The findings within this research support the notion that audiences are not uniformly seeking punishment but often seek proportionality and transparency. The spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 43) has suggested and framed cancel culture as a negative phenomenon, as it can mean that people often being publicly bashed and shamed, can make them and others afraid to speak up. However, interestingly, Participant 7 feels that cancel culture really only silences the ones that care about the opinions of others anyway. Saying, "*Because, if you as a person really value, what people think of you. Then you're just much less likely to make the*

same mistake twice". This came as an answer to the question whether cancel culture actually has a true purpose or not.

The purpose of cancel culture amongst the interviewees was a difficult concept to pin down. Similarly, to what Clark (2020, p. 89) has claimed of cancel culture losing its original meaning because of the exaggerated hate speech online, many of the participants were found saying they often empathized with those getting too much hate. Participant 10, admitted to feeling sympathy for those who received death threats as they said: "*the empathetic side of me is like, okay. They're also human, they messed up*". This follows a similar narrative found within the literature review, as the overwhelming amounts of hate causes the cancelled influencers to be able to deflect and make the audience lose the plot when it comes to true accountability. The nuance is often lost because the anger initially felt because of their actions, has turned into feelings of sympathy as most viewers' human side make them lose that affronted feeling. "*Look, everyone is human, of course. So everyone does something wrong once in a while*" (Mu). Participant 6, explained this phenomenon in her own words, as she saw trends of this herself and calls out those who cannot keep to the script when it comes to holding someone accountable. "*you guys are making this so dramatic, and obviously because of it being so dramatic, people are going to come back from it like years later they're going to be like, well, actually, this was *********". Thus, saying that the cancelled influencers are able to use the hate speech to their advantage.

Though, interestingly within the findings, a clear distinction could be made between cancelment over interpersonal drama, and business related controversies. The cancelment through drama was often seen as more long lasting, as it would touch multiple fandoms and therefore create more of an uproar within the beauty community. The business related controversies in this case were considered as misleading product reviews, or perhaps lying about sponsorships. Participant 6 stated: "*I think the misleading product reviews doesn't get you cancelled. I think it just gets you a lot of backlash. And then they apologize or fix themselves. For interpersonal, I feel like that's what really gets people cancelled and makes them like "you are a bad person", If you watch this person*.". The reason for this could be because audiences are often more angry on behalf of their favourite influencers, rather than when their favourite influencer upsets them. Participant 8 very eloquently wrapped that up by saying: "*interpersonal dramas often gets remembered more, though, because it just leaves people with, like, a more of a storyline that they can follow.*". This seemed to be the consensus for many of the other participants as well, because even though they would disengage with cancelled influencers, they would often still watch videos that are related to them to follow the drama. This reaffirms that while drama and being involved in controversy does not do well for someone's branding, it does do wonders for their notoriety, and therefore creates press for them.

So, while the short term affects of this would be follower loss, and disengagement. The long

term effects often do mean for more engagement in the end, as many of the participants admitted to forgetting about controversy after a while. Meaning that, what the viewers eventually would be left with is someone they vaguely know on the internet, but not knowing how. Which leaves the advantage with the cancelled beauty influencer. Though, to be fair, recurring behaviours did often lead to the participants being able to remember misconduct better. So, while one single recovered cancelment could be beneficial, continuous controversy would lead to negative consequences in the end. "*just anytime, I'd be looking at their content, I would be thinking of this thing that they've done and it would be very distracting*" (Participant 1).

4.4 Gendered Double Standards in Beauty Influencing

While not all participants had consistent knowledge to report on about gendered authenticity. It was stated that female influencers were judged more harshly than male influencers. As Participant 2 voiced, "*Women are judged a little bit more harshly, especially if there are straight men in the comments.*". And the beauty space was described as uniquely gendered, where influencers are expected to be both aspirational and approachable, beautiful yet relatable. Participant 5 reflected, "*They're expected to be perfect, but also raw and real.*"

Interestingly, while most were not aware of it, when having to describe the beauty space in comparison to other influencer spaces they like to watch, most participants would call the influencers and women watching beauty perhaps a bit shallow or frivolous. "*I mean, I feel like a girl who… not anyone, to be fair, who doesn't enjoy gaming. You would rather watch someone doing their makeup, or, I don't know, a day in the life going to, like, pilates or something.*" (Participant 8). "*Not to stereotype because obviously I enjoy both beauty and knitting, but I think in general the kind of people who consume those two contents are probably fairly different personality types*" (Participant 3). "*in the end, like, who is watching the beauty influencers? It's gay men and women. They are usually like, not to generalize here, but they are usually the core of drama*" (Participant 6). So, while most wanted to preface by saying they did not want to affirm any stereotypes, they still ended up stereotyping those who watch the same content they are watching themselves. Curating an image that the people who consume beauty content, are perhaps two dimensional. This judgement seems to stem from a familiar inherent misogynistic misunderstanding that the beauty space is seen as superficial and therefore not as important, or rather worthy of watching. While not all participants spoke on this, at least 5 of them had similar reactions to describing the beauty sphere. This seemed significant, as they seemed to cast themselves as the exemption of this judgement, but were fine with lumping others into a box of superficiality. This felt similar to the scrutinization that the influencers on the website GOMI (get off my internet) received, in which they were heavily criticized on all things that made them women. In this case, it was no longer the influencers being condemned for their

choices, but rather the women watching them for their choosing to consume such content. This underlying tone of judgement was never spoken out loud, but does indicate how we as women still have learned traits under a patriarchal society in which we are condemned for caring about our appearance or simply enjoying makeup content (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 65).

And so, while participants expressed empathy for influencers navigating this double bind of gendered authenticity (Duffy et al., 2022, p. 1660) they also unknowingly affirmed the difficulty of remaining authentic under such scrutiny for them and those watching them. Thus, maintaining the paradox of what being a women is in this current climate.

4.5 Parasocial Relationships and Viewer Responsibility

Parasocial relationships played a major role in how participants engaged with influencer controversies. Many described feeling more forgiving toward influencers they had been following for a long time. Participant 3 noted, *"If you really relate to someone and enjoy their content before the controversy. I think, a lot of the time, like you do kind of want to keep liking them and like if there is an option in which you can kind of accept they have done something wrong and like want to do better in which you can keep supporting them. I guess people deserve second chances. You're likely to give them, like, more grace".* Similarly, when asked about who they thought was an authentic beauty influencer, many followed it up by saying that they had been watching that person for a long time. This aligns with the theory that exposure over time does make someone feel like they have a connection to them (Auter, 1992, p. 178; Ballentine and Martin, 2005, p. 198). A sense of loyalty is created, in which viewers are more forgiving, even if they can acknowledge what the person has done is wrong. Participant 4 admitted: "*I would still watch her because at this point, I feel like I've become a little bit more loyal to her platform.*" When asked if she would still support Trixie Matell if they were to display inauthentic behaviour. Similarly, Participant 1 voiced as one of the first reasons when asked why she found Courtney Miller particularly authentic to be "*I've been following her on social media a while now*". Continuous exposure has thus proven to be a way how loyalty and connection can be formed between influencer and audience member.

However, this loyalty was not extended to everyone. While trust could be built and rebuilt after controversy, only through transparency and change would that be accepted. Participant 5 explained, *"They would have to address why they got cancelled and what their reaction is".* Participants acknowledged the illusion of intimacy that parasocial relationships create. As Participant 1 stated, *"People think you're their friend. And then when you act a certain way, it's not right in their minds.*", explaining how influencers are often viewed by their followers. This insight links directly to Reinikainen et al. (2020, p. 281) and Wilkie et al. (2022, p. 3505), who emphasized the emotional investment fostered through strategic self-disclosure. Though, participants recognized their role in co-

constructing influencer authenticity and held themselves responsible for critical engagement. One participant going as far as calling out the viewers themselves "*I think there is a lot of people that consume social media, who don't actively use their critical thought when consuming content.*" (Participant 1). Next, the notion that that parasocial relationships could reduce resistance and increase trust (Wilkie et al., 2022, p. 3505), was affirmed by Participant 3 as she explained why she did not mind watching sponsored content by influencers she liked; "*I'll be more interested in their opinion about things and also I think it's probably more likely that if I already follow them then the kind of thing they're going to promote is something I'm more likely to be interested in*". And by Participant 2 who voiced "*When I was younger, I would believe all everything that these people were saying 'cause I was like, wow, they're big on social media. They have a big following, they must know what they're doing*". Meaning that a big following and personal connection to the beauty influencer will give them more credibility with audiences. Thus, they are placed within an authoritative position of trust in which they are expected to give good recommendations to their followers.

Lastly, a distinction could be made between those that watched beauty influencers for their personalities or for their skill set with makeup. Often times, when the personality was prioritized, the participants would have stronger reaction to someone who was being cancelled. Like Participant 2, the built relationship would also potentially work against the influencer. As the fall and disappointment would often be greater when they actually did like them. "*If I've always thought this person was a good person. And then it turns out. Or in my opinion, it turns out they're not. Then that makes for a bigger disappointment than if I already thought like, OK, I don't really vibe with this person.*" Meaning that, the controversy is seen as a personal slight and taken harder by the audience, much like the expectation violations discussed by Burgoon and Hale (1988, p. 1), Davis and Todd (1985, p. 32), and Cohen (2010, p. 99), who explain this phenomenon as the personality based followers have set expectations on them, as they feel like they know them more. Thus, when they are wrong about someone much like in a friendship, the shame of that will make the resulting reaction bigger. The inconsistency within moral expectations between different influencers is explained perfectly by Participant 3: "*I think it'll probably matter less to me if it was someone I didn't engage much with anyway. Like if it's someone like I've maybe not followed as long or don't engage with as much. I probably don't, in my head, hold them to the same standards as someone who's content I really enjoy and like maybe have for a long time. I do think we probably as a whole have higher expectations of like our favourites*". This shows how the cancelment of beauty influencers is often reliant upon the parasocial relationship they have formed with that content creator, and is not always rooted in relationality but rather their emotional responses (Cohen, 2010, p. 99).

Moreover, for the those who followed someone for a specific skill, they would often overlook certain behaviours more. As it would technically not affect the way someone would be able to do their makeup and therefore, they were often able to look past it. While, on the opposite end, if someone followed a beauty influencer for their personality, the way they viewed them as a person was certainly affected by negative information and would hinder their engagement with them. An example of this was found through those who enjoyed content made by Jeffree Star, who is quite known for his outspoken personality and many controversies he has been in. Participant 6 in particular, watched his content purely because she perceived him to be truly honest during his reviews. As she valued honesty above else within authenticity, his transgression did not affect her view on him. The purpose for watching his content, therefore, was to gain information and learn, not to feel close to him. "*It was about him being so blunt and knowledgeable about the beauty industry that made me really interested in what he was doing.*" (Participant 6). Participant 8 had a similar way of thinking as she goes on to say: "*I mean, he reviews loads and loads of makeup, um, even makeup of people he genuinely likes and supports, and then he will give his… real review. He won't support them just because they're friends, or he's been paid to do so*". The branding that Jeffree Star in this case has created to be truthful to a fault, has benefited him to keep a large part of his audience hooked onto his content. Though his moral capital seems to be quite low, because the moral expectancy he has created amongst his viewers was in line with his actions, there were no harsh feelings of violation for them.

4.6 Engagement and Disengagement: Why Viewers Stay or Leave

Engagement was largely driven by either aesthetic alignment or perceived personality resonance. "*For beauty influencers, I always think it's very nice when they have a similar… I would say, just like physique or like body type or like face*" (Participant 1), "*I think I normally end up like following influences that like have the same kind of makeup style as me, which is kind of like just like everyday like glowy makeup*" (Participant 3). Most of the other participants held similar sentiments regarding why a beauty influencer would stand out to them. This supports the idea that parasocial relationships are indeed made on the basis of homophily (Lee & Watkins, 2016, p. 5755).

As the distinction between skill and personality was made, all participants still wanted someone to be engaging enough to keep their attention, even if they had no personal opinions about them. "*There's like a TikToker that I had seen a while ago and she had come up on my for you explore a bit. But the way that she talked was just not it. I was not engaging with it at all, even though she had really interesting things to say. I was just not captivated, so I just at some point started scrolling past*" (Participant 1). This indicates how, even though personality and skill are both important to catch a viewers attention, outside factors like presentation and speech are needed to keep viewers

entertained.

The decision to follow or unfollow an influencer, to some, was framed as a deliberate act. Participant 1 described her process as a careful selection to avoid information overload: "*I make active, deliberate decisions to follow people.*". While to others, their social media activity was much more driven by boredom or passive scrolling, with Participant 7 saying: "*with TikTok I also don't quite feel like I necessarily have to follow someone because I'm never on that page anyway*". Thus, they often did not feel the need to actually click the follow button. This distance created by not deliberately following creators, had strong implications for their engagement patterns. As their parasocial relationships were not quite as developed, they did not have very strong opinions on who they found particularly authentic. Moreover, when asked if they ever felt personally disappointed by an influencer, they would not be able to answer right away as they did not have any memorable impressions of the people they would see on their social media's. This caused the effect that they would often misjudge or not know about certain controversies and therefore still watch people they would normally not support. Next to that, there would be no behavioural expectations made by these participants, which meant that the violation was not felt as strongly. Therefore, the acceptance of misconduct was not taken personally. "*Like it doesn't personally hurt my feelings just makes me bummed out now I cannot watch something I like*" (Participant 4), expressing that while she understood morally that she should not support a controversial influencer, she did not actually feel particularly offended on someone else's behalf. Her moral capital, in this case, did not matter to her as much as she goes on to state: "*I wasn't a loyal… watcher of either of them, so it's easy for me to put it under the rug, sweep it under the rug*", explaining that the controversy between two influencers did not hold much weight to her personally.

Most participants indicated that misalignment with personal views could lead to disengagement. One participant unfollowed a comedian after discovering her pro-Trump stance, noting, "*At that point I don't find her comedy funny anymore.*" (Participant 1), or Participant 4 who stated: "*Like for example women's rights and queer rights and Black Lives Matter, all these stuff that are for inclusivity, inclusion, harmony all that stuff. It matters to me. And if you are discriminatory in any of these dimensions, I'm going to block you*". What is important to note about this particular interviewee, is that she expressed to following beauty influencers for skill. Which, would have previously indicated that a participant then would not care as much about controversy. However, evidently if it is taken as a personal slight it does affect the way the influencer is seen by her. This shows that the alignment of personal values, is perhaps the most important part for engagement. Participant 2, who liked to follow people for both personality and skill, said: "*If they did something that's really out of my values and my norms. Then, I would not engage with this person anymore*". And so, many of the other participants had similar sentiments about their personal values. While

moral capital could definitely have interplay here, it seems that even though it partly could be done for social status like Adams (2011, p. 277) suggests. The morality they belief is lacking, is still present within the participants.

While some disengagement was passive (e.g., scrolling past), others actively blocked influencers. Participant 4 explained, "*I block everything that I'm like, I don't want to see you".* Though, this was seen as quite harsh as many of the participants were too passively using social media to feel strong enough to block someone. Many who did not have particularly strong parasocial relationships with any beauty influencers also did not feel the need to block nor mute anyone. The furthest length they were willing to go to was click an option that would discourage the algorithm from showing those people often. "*Majority of the time, I will click, sometimes saying, um, I'm not interested*" (Participant 8). Similarly, Participant 7 said "*I wouldn't block that much, because yeah, you know it doesn't really matter that much*". Often this was also based in the fact that they would still keep up with the drama, and wanted to be able to see the controversial videos for themselves. "*I think I normally kind of like wait, wait for more information to come out and then like make a judgement. Like I'll consume all the info on Tiktok, but I tend to wait for quite a while*" (Participant 3), here she explains a common sentiment amongst most of the participants. As Participant 6, Participant 4, and Participant 2 also similarly expressed that they enjoyed seeing the drama unfold online and therefore would not completely disengage with those influencers.

On the other hand, there were also participants who did not enjoy drama, and therefore would always scroll away when seeing controversial content. "*I just don't personally engage with scandals and dramas that much. Because. I can't be bothered. That is negativity, negative energy that you're accepting into yourself.*" (Participant 1). In this case, their disengagement wouldn't particularly stem from offense or moral capital, but rather simply based on the fact that they did not like to see those types of videos. Even if it was not directly from the controversial beauty influencers' account, their actions would be to scroll past. A happenstance from this behaviour, would be that these participants then were out of the loop about what actually happened during these controversies. Participant 8 in particular, expressed to not liking drama "*I genuinely try and stay away from all this drama*". But contradictorily and simultaneously also expressed that she liked to watch Jeffree Star's content when he was not surrounded by drama. When asked if she knew about his past cancellations, Participant 8 answered that she did not and felt that "*there's always something about everyone*", meaning that the phenomenon of her not liking drama has resulted in her finding cancel culture frivolous. Admittedly, cancel culture does get taken too far at times. But it is proof of how the surges of hate speech and many unfounded cancelments make viewers not take it seriously. Similar to what Participant 6 expressed when shaming those who go overboard when enacting judgement, the way cancel culture is viewed also plays into how viewers engage or disengage with controversial beauty

influencers.

Overall, the findings highlight that audience engagement with beauty influencers is shaped not only by the appeal of content, personality or skill but also by deeply embedded expectations around authenticity, morality and emotional transparency. Participants described engaging more consistently with influencers who appeared relatable and emotionally open, particularly when self-disclosure was perceived as sincere rather than strategic. A pattern that supports Banet-Weiser's (2021, p. 14) notion of authenticity as a moral performance and Edlom's (2020, p. 140) concept of "created authenticity." However, this engagement is precarious. When influencers violate personal boundaries, for example by appearing disingenuous, or excessively commercial in the eyes of the participant. The participants reported forms of disengagement ranging from emotional withdrawal to unfollowing and public critique. It reflects the increasingly active role audiences play as moral gatekeepers who selectively invest or retract their attention based on complex ethical and commercial cues. However, disengagement is not always absolute; it highlights how parasocial bonds can both buffer and intensify the decision to disengage (Delbaere et al., 2021, p. 103).

5. Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore how young women between the ages of 18 and 25 perceive and interpret authenticity within beauty influencer culture, and how these perceptions intersect with their understandings of cancel culture. With the research question being: "How do audiences' perceptions of authenticity and cancel culture shape their engagement with beauty influencers?". By conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews and employing thematic analysis grounded in an extensive literature review, this research drew on performativity theory, the Persuasion Knowledge Model, and parasocial interaction theory. This study has offered new insights into the how morality and emotionality interconnect when handling them with the commercial dynamics that are found within audience-influencer relationships in highly feminized digital spaces.

5. 1 Summary of Key Findings

The findings revealed that authenticity, while central to influencer appeal, is not a fixed or inherent trait but a performative, strategic construct. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of emotional vulnerability and the consistent need for transparency to understand and feel closeness with someone online. However, it was also recognized that all influencer content is curated to some extent. According to the findings, Influencers who skilfully balance this relatability with aesthetics are often perceived as "real," while those whose content is perceived as overly commercial or disingenuous triggered scepticism and disengagement from the participants. This supports the theoretical arguments that authenticity in influencer culture functions as a branding tool a carefully calibrated performance designed to appear effortless (Banet-Weiser, 2021, p. 14; Hund, 2023, p. 2; Feasey, 2024, p. 122).

Another key theme that affected engagement was the complex role of sponsorships and commercial content. While participants accepted that influencers must monetize their platforms to sustain their careers, excessive or poorly aligned advertisements were often read as breaches of trust. Notably, instances where influencers contradicted prior reviews or failed to disclose sponsorships were viewed as violations of audience expectations, often also resulting in disengagement or criticism. These findings resonated with the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p. 7), but also suggested that modern audiences are increasingly sophisticated in navigating commercial messages without necessarily having to fully reject them.

When it came to cancel culture, as described by the participants, it was seen as both necessary and problematic. While most believed that influencers should be held accountable for unethical or harmful behaviour, they were also critical of the excesses of cancel culture. Particularly when backlash was seen as disproportionate, or lacked context. Women influencers were seen as

especially vulnerable to public shaming, due in part to the gendered expectations placed on them to be attractive, vulnerable, relatable, and modest all at once. These contradictory pressures reflect broader societal norms about femininity and digital labour, and reinforce Duffy et al.'s (2022, p. 1660) concept of "gendered authenticity". Public scrutiny, then, is not merely about influencer conduct but also about how women are socially allowed to occupy public space.

The data also demonstrated the emotional power of parasocial relationships (PSRs). Many participants described influencers as feeling like friends or familiar figures, shaped by long-term following and perceived attitude homophily. These bonds contributed to increased tolerance in some cases, as followers were more likely to forgive mistakes made by influencers they felt emotionally connected to. However, the same emotional proximity also intensified feelings of betrayal when expectations were not met, especially regarding ethical or commercial integrity. Thus, PSRs simultaneously foster loyalty and increase the stakes of perceived inauthenticity.

Finally, this study highlighted the active role audiences play in policing influencer behaviour. Participants did not view themselves as passive consumers but understood that their engagement or disengagement were important factors within social justice. While some engaged critically with content, and made deliberate decisions about who to follow or block, others felt more relaxed about their decisions online. Though all felt empowered to enforce standards of authenticity and morality. In this way, audiences function as cultural gatekeepers, shaping influencer visibility through acts of engagement and disengagement.

5. 2 Contributions to Scholarship

This thesis contributes to a growing body of literature on influencer culture by offering a qualitative, audience-centered perspective that has often been overlooked in existing research, which tends to focus on influencers' self-presentation strategies or commercial metrics. By centering the voices of young women, who are the primary consumers of beauty content, this research provides a richer understanding of how authenticity, morality, and emotional labour are interpreted and enforced from below. It also demonstrates how intimate digital relationships such as PSRs complicate conventional marketing logic, blurring the line between friendship, advertising, realness and performance.

Moreover, this research strengthens theoretical discussions around performativity and authenticity in digital culture by showing how followers interpret, negotiate, and sometimes resist influencer performances. It has illustrated how cancel culture functions as a gendered form of moral regulation, targeting women influencers in ways that reflect both feminist and postfeminist contradictions. These insights suggest that influencer-audience relationships are not only transactional but deeply emotional and situated within the a complex culture.

5. 3 Limitations, Future Research

While this study has provided valuable insights, it also has certain limitations. The sample size, though consistent with qualitative research standards, was relatively small and geographically limited. All participants identified as women between 18 and 25, which means that perspectives outside this demographic, for example; Older users, male or non-binary viewers, or even creators themselves, were not included. Additionally, the study focused solely on beauty influencers, which may limit its applicability to other genres such as gaming, fitness, or any other social sector in which influencing can be found.

Future research could expand on this work by exploring how different demographic groups perceive authenticity and cancel culture, or by conducting longitudinal studies on how specific cancellations are viewed over time. Another promising direction would be to investigate how platform-specific norms (e.g., TikTok vs. YouTube) shape audience expectations around authenticity or cancel culture as this was not honed in on within this study. What could be especially interesting is to do interviews with creators themselves to review how they experience and manage the psychological impacts of public scrutiny.

5. 4 Final Reflections and Reflexivity

Given the deeply subjective and interpretive nature of this research, reflexivity has been a vital part of the process. As a young woman who is also embedded in the digital spaces under investigation, I approached this project not as a detached observer but as someone with existing knowledge, emotional responses and everyday interactions with influencer culture. My own familiarity with beauty content and platform dynamics likely shaped how I designed the study, engaged with participants and interpreted their responses. While this insider perspective allowed me to build rapport with interviewees and understand subtle platform norms and language, I remained critically aware of my assumptions throughout. Regular memo writing and discussions with peers helped surface moments where my interpretations may have been shaped by personal experiences rather than grounded in the data. By maintaining a reflective stance and making space for divergent or even contradictory participant voices, I aimed to ensure that the findings remained authentic to the complexities of audience engagement, rather than serving to confirm preconceived beliefs

Ultimately, influencer culture is not just about branding or aesthetics; it is about how we perform ourselves for others, how we demand moral consistency in the public figures we admire, and how digital spaces are shaped by the everyday judgments of those who scroll, watch, comment, and care.

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Appendix A

Anonymous Participant Overview

Particip ant:	Age	Nationality	Highest form of Eduction	Platforms used	Content preference	Engagement bias	Interactivity
1	23	Dutch-Argentinian	High school	TikTok, YouTube	Tutorials, Reviews	Personality & Aesthetic	Daily
2	22	Dutch	Bachelor degree	TikTok, Instagram	Tutorials, Reviews, Challenges	Skill & personality	Daily
3	21	British	Certificate of higher education	TikTok, YouTube	Tutorials, Everyday glowy makeup	Personality	Daily
4	21	Turkish	Bachelor degree	YouTube, Instagram	Tutorials, Creative alternative makeup	Skills	Daily
5	23	Dutch	Bachelor degree	Instagram, YouTube	GRWM	Personality	Daily
6	24	Dutch	Bachelor degree	YouTube, TikTok	Tutorials, Creative alternative makeup	Skills	Daily
7	22	Dutch	Bachelor degree	YouTube, TikTok, Instagram	Natural makeup, GRWM, Reviews, Tutorials	Personality	Daily
8	24	Britsh-Polish	Bachelor degree	TikTok, Instagram	Natural makeup, Heavy eyes, Reviews	Personality and skill	Daily
9	20	Dutch	MBO 4	TikTok, Instagram, YouTube	Bargains, GRWM	Personality, mostly skills	Daily/Weekly

Particip ant:	Age	Nationality	Highest form of Eduction	Platforms used	Content preference	Engagement bias	Interactivity
10	21	American	Bachelor degree	TikTok, YouTube	Heavy glam makeup, Reviews	Personality	Daily
11	24	Portuguese	Bachelor degree	YouTube, TikTok, Instagram	Natural, Trendy	Personality	Daily/weekly

Appendix B

Recruitment Message

"Hi! I'm conducting research for my Master's thesis on how audiences perceive authenticity and cancel culture in the beauty influencer world. I'm looking to speak with women aged 18-25 who regularly watch beauty content on YouTube, Instagram, or TikTok. The interview will take about an hour and is fully anonymous. If you're interested, please let me know, and I can share more details!"

Interview Guide

Consent

- Do you consent to this interview being recorded and used for research?

Introduction & Background

1. Could you tell me a bit about yourself?

- Interests, age, nationality, education

2. Can you tell me a bit about your interest in beauty influencers?

- How long have you been following beauty influencers?

- What kind of beauty content do you consume the most (e.g., tutorials, reviews, lifestyle vlogs)?

3. Which social media platforms do you primarily use to follow beauty influencers?

- Do you follow different influencers on different platforms?

4. How often do you engage with beauty influencer content (e.g., watching videos, liking posts, commenting)?

5. What makes a beauty influencer stand out to you?

- Do you prefer influencers with a specific aesthetic or personality or is their skill level?

Authenticity

6. How would you define authenticity

- **Make them reflect with no leading or examples**

7. What makes an influencer seem "authentic" to you?

- Is it their personality, content style, transparency, or something else?

8. How do you determine if someone is being genuine versus performing authenticity?
9. Can you describe a beauty influencer you find particularly authentic or inauthentic? What about them gives you that impression?

- Can you give specific examples of content that felt real or fake to you?

10. If you were to notice an influencer weren't being inauthentic, what would your following actions be? Are there influencers you still follow even if they seem inauthentic?

11. How do you feel about influencers who do sponsored content?

- How much trust do you have in a product when it is a paid promotion?
- Are there influencers you have faith in doing trustworthy advertisements? If so, who?

Cancel culture

13. Have you seen a beauty influencer you follow face public backlash?

- What happened

- How did you feel about it?

- Was the backlash justified in your opinion? Why or why not

- Did you participate in the discussion, or just observe?

14. Have you personally ever felt disappointed or betrayed by an influencer? Why or why not?

15. What do you think are the main reasons beauty influencers get "cancelled"?

- Are there specific topics or behaviours that always seem to trigger backlash?

- Do you think influencers are more likely to get cancelled for personal behaviours or for business-related controversies (e.g., misleading product reviews)?

16. Do you believe cancelled influencers deserve the backlash they receive? Why or why not?

- Can you think of an example where someone was unfairly cancelled?

- What about a case where the backlash was completely justified?

17. How do you think influencers should respond when they are being cancelled?

- What kind of apology or response do you expect from them?

- What do you think when they simply don't respond at all? I.e. silence

18. Do you think cancel culture actually has a purpose/works? Why or why not?

Personal engagement with cancel culture

19. If an influencer were to regain your trust or follow after they had previously lost it, what would that look like to you?

- How much time would this realistically take?

20 How does the reputation the influencer had before the controversy come into play for you?

21. How do you come to form your opinion on an influencer facing backlash?

- Have you ever changed your opinion based on what others were saying?

- Has there ever been a time where you felt like you unjustly judged an influencer?

  - What happened?

22. When you come across content from an influencer that is being cancelled, how do you treat this content? What are your following actions?

23. If you were to imagine coming across a piece of information about your favourite influencers past, lets say a previous scandal, how would you go about your engagement with them going forward? (In the court of public opinion they have hypothetically recovered)

- Is this a, "this was years ago, they've already been cancelled and recovered it doesn't matter"?, or would you want to find out everything about the situation and evaluate for yourself?

Gendered insights

24. Do you ever see a difference in cancellation when it comes to men or women?

25. Are there any different expectations when it comes to authenticity between men and women?

Reflections

26. If you were to think about all the influencers in different fields or industries, (e.g., gaming, fitness, or tech) what similarities and differences could you think of when it comes to authenticity between that type of influencing and the beauty space?

27. How can the way an influencer engages with their audience influence how authentic they seem?

28. When influencers are presenting themselves online, what are your thoughts on the constant feedback loop that they are receiving?

- Is it something that just comes with the territory?

- Is it within an audiences' right to comment on an influencer?

29. When you think of influencing as a whole, do you think influencer culture is changing (whether for better or worse), or has it always been the same the you?

Closing questions

30. Is there anything else you'd like to add about your thoughts on influencer authenticity or cancel culture?

31. If not discussed yet: Age, Nationality, Highest form of education?

Theme	Code	Definition	Example
1. Performance of authenticity	Authenticity as a feeling	Audience describes authenticity as something intuitive or felt rather than objectively verifiable.	"You can just tell from someone's mannerisms if they're being forced." (Participant 3) "I feel like you can easily tell by sometimes their behaviour or facial expressions." (Participant 2) "I just kind of sense the vibe" (Participant 6)
	Strategic authenticity	Influencer appears real while still curating content, recognized by viewers as a necessary part of brand management.	"Though, social media's very curated. And so I don't think you can find authenticity in social media that look you for in real life" (Participant 1) "The basic and I guess the simplest answer would be like staying true to themselves, which is difficult to perceive on the internet because you don't know this person. So you don't know if they're staying true to themselves" (Participant 2)
	Self-disclosure	Emotional honesty or private sharing that builds audience trust.	"I think having a very open attitude" (Participant 7) "she has struggles that she's been honest with, and she does so enthusiastically" (Participant 1, about Madeline White) "I love the raw and rough parts of an influencer as well" (Participant 4)

Theme	Code	Definition	Example
	Inauthenticity	Describes influencers who appear scripted, overly polished, or trend-chasing.	"If somebody is going to use some buzzwords like blueberry milk makeup. I'm not going to look at that" (Participant 4) "if somebody says those buzzwords, I immediately kind of snap back to reality saying oh this person is just trying to cater to an algorithm" (Participant 4)
2. Sponsorship and consumer expectations	Transparency in ads	Influencer clearly signals when content is sponsored	"I don't have issues if they follow the law in making it clear it is sponsored content" (Participant 3) "Then it's like at least there's some honesty there. Like, you know, they're being paid to promote this product and maybe they're still saying their real opinions, but at least now you can see for yourself if you believe them." (Participant 2, about when influencers disclose an ad)
	Selling out	Perception that influencers accept irrelevant sponsorships purely for financial gain. Influencers can only accept advertisements that fit with their brand	"They don't have their own opinion if it's all sponsored stuff." (Participant 7) "Take ads with brands that really fit their persona and not really do it just to make money" (Participant 5)
	Capitalism fatigue	Critique of consumerism and constant commercial exposure on platforms.	"I cannot catch a break from all the commercials." (Participant 4) "when something is an ad, it is pushing for

| Theme	Code	Definition	Example
			consumerism" (Participant 1)
	Persuasion knowledge	Viewers knowing about influencers attempt at persuasion	"When I see something is an ad, I do lose interest quite quickly" (Participant 1)
			"I feel like it's a very fine line between not sponsoring anything and like trying to shovel products down my throat". (Participant 4)
	Trust loss	Audience perceives promotional behavior as deceptive or contradictory to previous claims	"You lied about what your platform is based on." (Participant 1)
3. Cancel Culture and Digital morality	Deserved Vs Undeserved	Participants distinguish between holding influencers accountable and punishing minor mistakes	"Hate on social media is extreme and I don't believe in fighting fire with fire" (Participant 1)
			"I think the concept of like mass cancelling people in general has become kind of trendy and very damaging. People will go off on a whim and start these kind of hate campaigns"(Participant 3)
			"If somebody is being canceled for bad behavior, I don't think that's getting canceled, I feel like that's being corrected" (Participant 4)
	Accountability	Audience expectation that influencers should apologize or show growth	"An apology is a nice place to start" (Participant 1)
			"Like, if you really realize you're wrong, and I think you should also let your audience know 'cause,

Theme	Code	Definition	Example
			you're a public figure at that point, right? As an influencer, so you should set the example of being like OK. I indeed saw this is wrong. And then explain it to the people." (Participant 2)
			"Not doing the bad thing again, that's important, but also not sweeping it under the rug and pretending like it never happened and has nothing to do with you" (Participant 3)
	Backlash severity	Degree of reaction based on the type of transgression (e.g., interpersonal vs. product dishonesty)	"interpersonal dramas often get remembered more, though Because it just leaves people with, like, a more of a storyline that they can follow" (Participant 8)
			"I generally feel that. With business related controversy is that it's made way less big. Then when other people are involved." (Participant 3)
	Moral expectations	Audiences apply shared ethical standards, especially regarding racism, discrimination, etc.	"When people go on racist rants, misogynistic rants, homophobic rants." (Participant 1)
			"But I think when it happens multiple times and there's lots of different controversies, it's a very good indicator that a person is not who they display themselves to be on the internet" (Participant 3)
			"If you're not being inclusive. If you like you're being derogatory discriminatory all these

Theme	Code	Definition	Example
			things" (Participant 4)
			"Look If it's really something about racism or something like that, I do think that's a really bad topic" (Particpant 9)
4. Gendered double standards	Feminine scrutiny	Female influencers judged more harshly for appearance, behaviour, and tone.	"But I do want to say that most often, women are judged a little bit more harshly. Especially if there is straight men in the comments" (Participant 2)
			"I think for women it can last longer because I feel like women are also talking more about each other" (Participant 5, about why drama lasts longer within the beauty space)
			"The women in the industry are probably just scrutinized a lot 'cause they're not fulfilling the exact image ways the men are not gonna fit into anyway" (Participant 6, about why women are more scrutinized than men in the beauty community)
	Internalized misogyny	Participants make assumptions about other women viewers or influencers.	"Don't know, whereas... I mean, I feel like a girl who... not anyone, to be fair, who doesn't enjoy gaming. You would rather watch someone doing their makeup, or, I don't know, a day in the life going to, like, pilates or something" (Participant 8)
			"In the end, like, who is watching the beauty influencers? It's gay men and women. They are usually like, not to

Theme	Code	Definition	Example
			generalize here, but they are usually the core of drama" (Participant 6)
5. Parasocial relationships and viewer responsibility	Parasocial closeness	Feelings of closeness with an in influencer,	"I do like to watch authentic content, but that also brings me at risk of developing a parasocial relationship because I'm like you're so real bestie, and I also don't really like that" (Participant 6)
	Loyalty bias	Talk of loyalty, talk of liking someone for an extended amount of time	"If you really relate to someone and enjoy their content before the controversy. I think. A lot of the time, like you do kind of want to keep liking them and like if there is an option in which you can kind of accept they have done something wrong and like want to do better in which you can keep supporting them. I guess people deserve second chances. You're likely to give them like more grace" (Participant 3)
	Persuasion allowance	Participants watching and believing influencers when they are doing advertisements	"I'll be more interested in their opinion about things and also I think it's probably more likely that if I already follow them then the kind of thing they're going to promote is something I'm more likely to be interested in" (Participant 3)
6. Engagement and Disengagement	Active disengagement	Reasons to unfollow someone and ways to disengage with them	"If you don't support somebody, then don't give them more engagement because their work depends on engagement"

Theme	Code	Definition	Example
			(Participant 1)
	Passive disengagement	Reasons why they don't feel the need to follow anyone	"with TikTok I also don't quite feel like I necessarily have to follow someone because I'm never on that page anyway" (Participant 7)
	Aesthetics vs Personality alignment	What makes influencers stand out to them? What do they value when watching someone?	" If it's about makeup, then it's the craft. If it's also discussing a bit, then it's mostly their personality." (Participant 2)
	Refollows and trust	How someone regains trust, Why they would follow someone again, what would be needed in order to	"Yeah, it would just really depend on what the person had done and if it was something I personally felt I could let go from someone I looked up to or not." (Participant 3)
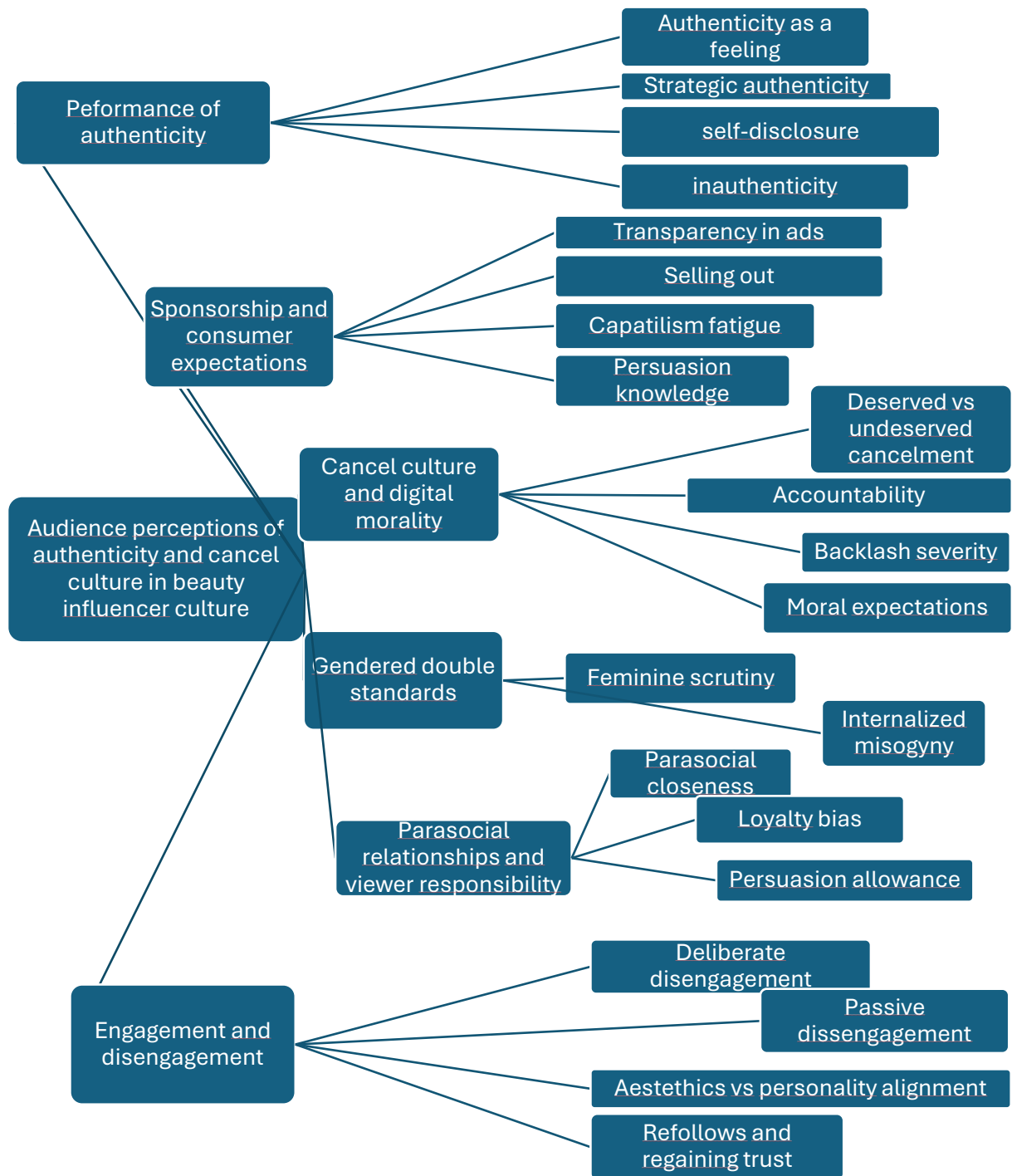
CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Caroline Haas, 617954ch@eur.nl

DESCRIPTION

You are invited to participate in a research about authenticity and cancel culture within beauty content. The purpose of the study is to understand audiences' perceptions of authenticity and cancel culture and how it shapes their engagement with beauty influencers.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms, my questions will be related to your consumption of beauty content and the creators within will be discussed as well as your personal opinions regarding their authenticity. Moreover, you will also be asked to share your opinions and attitude regarding any controversies they might have faced and your values when it comes to their potential cancellation.

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will make an audio recording of the interview.

I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. I will not use your name or other identifying information such as names in the study. The participants in the study will only be referred to with pseudonyms, and in terms of general characteristics such as age and gender, etc.

You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take one hour. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PAYMENTS

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

DATA COLLECTION AND RETENTION

During the interview the following personal data will be collected from you: Name, age, gender, audio or visual recordings, occupation, cultural background, ethnic background, sentiments about / feelings about / opinions about topics within the study.

In addition, it is also possible that you will talk about your political affiliation and religious or philosophical beliefs and those of others, as these may also relate to your opinion about gender.

Lastly, I will need your email address to send the results of the study to you by email, if you wish to receive those.

Your data will be retained for a minimum of one year. I retain the data so that other researchers have the opportunity to verify that the research was conducted correctly.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish— Erik Hitters, head of ESHCC department at Erasmus University, hitters@eshcc.eur.nl

Do you have a complaint or concerns about your privacy? Please email Caroline Haas (617954ch@eur.nl) or visit www.autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl. (T: 088 - 1805250)

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you DO NOT NEED to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be recorded during this study:

Name   Signature

Date

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study

Name   Signature

Date