Silence or solidarity?
Audience expectations regarding influencers' responses to global conflicts.

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SILENCE OR SOLIDARITY? AUDIENCE EXPECTATIONS REGARDING INFLUENCERS' RESPONSES TO GLOBAL CONFLICTS.

Abstract

In today's digital era, social media influencers have emerged as significant opinion leaders, shaping public discourse on pressing global crises. This thesis investigates the expectations that Dutch young adults (aged 16–29) hold regarding the crisis-related communications of influencers on Instagram. Despite their prominence in the media landscape, little is known about how followers perceive the authenticity and responsibility of influencer responses during critical events such as war, climate change, and sexual misconduct.

This study delves into the question: *What are the expectations of Dutch young adults regarding the social media activity and statements of public figures about current crises concerning war, climate change, and sexual harassment?* Drawing on theories such as parasocial relationships, uses and gratifications, cultivation theory, and social identity theory, the study examines how followers interpret influencers' social responsibility, authenticity, and credibility during crises.

A qualitative approach was employed using five focus groups with diverse participants. Two influencers: Monica Geuze (macro-influencer) and Tom Schimmelpennink (micro-influencer). Together they served as case examples to explore how follower count and content alignment affect audience expectations.

Findings reveal that audiences value authenticity and consistency over frequency of posting. Influencers are expected to speak out when the issue aligns with their identity and previous content. Participants emphasized the importance of explaining the reason behind it. Crises perceived as moral (e.g., sexual misconduct) evoked stronger expectations for influencers to take a public stance, while politically sensitive topics like war were approached more cautiously. Climate change prompted mixed reactions, often depending on the influencer's perceived credibility on the topic.

This study contributes to the understanding of how social media users—especially Gen Z—perceive the role of influencers in times of crisis. The findings offer insights for influencers, communication professionals, and policy makers aiming to engage young audiences in a credible and responsible manner.

KEYWORDS: *audience expectations, influencers, conflict*

Preface

Throughout my academic career, I have continuously sought to understand the complexities of human decision making and behaviour. In my bachelor, I studied consumer behaviour mainly in the context of food and supermarkets in Wageningen. I found that I had a lot of interest in the thought processes behind decisions consumers make. This interest can also be found in my master programme, Media and Creative Industries, where consumers are constantly influenced through the influencers on social media, or campaigns and ads on streaming services. Given the modern aspects of the concept of influencers, I wanted to find out more about them in combination with my earlier interest; consumers. During my master's program, social media became filled with images and news about the Gaza war, sparking widespread protests. The reaction was so intense that whenever influencers— individuals with large followings—posted content unrelated to the conflict, such as business updates, humorous videos, or candid personal photos, they were met with harsh criticism. Even when influencers did address the situation, many were accused of not doing enough. This phenomenon piqued my interest in understanding public expectations: Do people believe that influencers have an inherent social responsibility due to their extensive reach? Where should the line be drawn between maintaining authenticity and fulfilling this perceived duty? And do these expectations apply uniformly across all influencers, or do certain factors influence them?

I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor, prof. dr. Jeroen Jansz, for providing support and guidance, to my participants who were willing to take the time out of their busy schedule to help with my research and provide the data for this study, and to my boyfriend, my friends and my family for pushing and inspiring me whenever needed, for their unwavering support and advise throughout both my academic career and my personal journey. Their insights and encouragement have been very important in overcoming the challenges encountered along the way. I would not want to have done this without them.

During the process of writing this thesis, this support and guidance I received was invaluable. Despite believing I had enough self-discipline and time management skills to meet all the deadlines, I sometimes struggled to balance my hobbies and other responsibilities with my thesis work. Initially, I thought that writing a thesis would offer abundant freedom. However, I soon realized that what felt like free time actually meant I rarely had any. This experience taught me to manage my time more effectively, holding myself accountable while also being kind to myself.

When it came to the actual writing, I found it challenging to determine what was most relevant and to arrange the theories and other topics of the thesis in a logical order. My early drafts often jumped from one subject to another without clear transitions. With the help of my supervisor, I began to reshape my writing into something more coherent and focused.

This thesis is organized into five chapters. It begins with theoretical foundations, followed by an exploration of the methodology, a presentation of the results, and ends with a conclusion that ties together the insights gained along the way. I invite you to join me in exploring audience expectations and the role of influencers, hoping that my work sparks further thought and inquiry.

Els de Graauw

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1. Introduction

In the digital era, social media has transformed how public figures engage with their audiences, blurring the boundaries between personal expression and public responsibility. This transformation has been especially impactful for young adults, who increasingly form strong bonds with public figures on social media through parasocial relationships, emotional, one-sided connections where followers perceive influencers as relatable and trustworthy (Konijn & Hoorn, 2017). These dynamics raise important questions about the expectations followers have of public figures, particularly in times of crisis.

Public figures on social media have to navigate a rapidly evolving landscape of expectations, accountability, and identity representation. For many Dutch young adults aged 16 to 29, influencers and other public figures are not just perceived as content creators but as opinion leaders and representatives of shared social identities. Through their social media presence, whether sharing political views, commenting on current events, starting livestreams or posting a funny video, these public figures play an increasing prominent role in shaping public discourse. Their statements, or silence, during moments of crisis, such as war, climate change, and sexual harassments can influence the perceptions, emotions and actions of their followers.

Each of these crises carries distinct social and emotional implications. War, especially when geographically proximate, represents an immediate threat to safety and stability. Climate change, while a more abstract or long-term concern, is often framed as a global existential challenge. Sexual harassment, meanwhile, is rooted in deeply personal and emotionally charged experiences. These distinctions affect how crises are perceived and how influencers are expected to respond.

In the last few years, crises like war, climate change and sexual harassment and their consequences have been brought to the public eye more, mainly through the news or social media. As a result, social media has become a place where people voice their opinions and concerns regarding any crisis. Following high-profile crises such as the conflict in Gaza, social media users have increasingly used comment sections to redirect attention toward ongoing humanitarian issues, regardless of the original post's content. Such responses reflect heightened expectations of social awareness and solidarity from influencers.

Parasocial relationships can deepen this dynamic. Followers often feel emotionally connected to influencers, perceiving them as relatable figures who share their struggles,

aspirations, and values. These relationships cause audiences to have expectations, as they view influencers not just as entertainers but as moral agents with a platform to drive awareness and change. Research about financial influencers shows that the perceived authenticity of influencers can significantly shape audience responses and behaviours (Van Reijmersdal & Hudders, 2023). As such, public figures are increasingly held accountable not only for the content they produce, but also for the stances they take or avoid.

This study seeks to investigate the expectations of young Dutch adults regarding the role of public figures on their social media presence during times of crisis. For the purposes of this research, public figures are defined as individuals with large platforms on Instagram because of a skill or expertise (e.g., actors, fitness coaches, cooks, models), but who are not professionally involved in politics. This distinction helps isolate audience expectations regarding public figures whose primary role is not to comment on societal issues.

The research draws on key theoretical frameworks, including the concept of parasocial relationships, self-categorization theory, uses and gratification theory, cultivation theory and the congruence theory. Together, they help explain how and why audiences form strong connections with social media influencers, how influencers' actions impact trust and engagement, and what roles influencers are expected to play in the digital public sphere.

By examining how influencers navigate the tension between personal branding and social activism, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of public discourse, digital responsibility, and the evolving norms of social media engagement. It addresses the following research question:

What are the expectations of Dutch, young adults between the age of 16 and 29 regarding the social media activity and statements of public figures about current crises concerning war, climate and sexual harassment?

The scientific relevance of this study lies in its combination of modern media and current crisis. By shedding light on audience expectations and the ethical dimensions of influencer communication it brings a lot of meaningful insights within the media landscape. As social media increasingly serves as a platform for activism, identity expression, and public debate, it is crucial to develop a nuanced understanding of how influencers negotiate their roles and responsibilities. By investigating public expectations regarding social responsibility and brand identity, especially in the context of crisis, this research advances academic discussions on digital communication, influencer culture, and audience engagement.

Moreover, the study addresses gaps in current literature by providing empirically grounded evidence that enriches theoretical debates and offers practical insights for policymakers and scholars. The findings have implications for creating more effective communication strategies and contribute to a deeper understanding of mediated social interactions in modern society, ultimately guiding future research and informing approaches to digital media governance.

This study holds significant societal relevance as it provides critical insights for public institutions aiming to develop and implement effective campaigns on, for example, climate change and environmental issues. The research identifies key target demographics and describes the most effective strategies for engaging these audiences, thereby informing both policy initiatives and advocacy efforts. Furthermore, the findings offer valuable perspectives for the media and creative industries, where influencers serve dual roles as content creators and as symbolic figures for brands. By portraying the mechanisms of audience engagement and influence, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of communication dynamics in a contemporary, media-driven society, ultimately supporting more informed and impactful outreach initiatives.

The next chapter presents a review of existing theories that explain the formation of expectations and their influence on the image of public figures. These theoretical frameworks not only address the research question but also support the conceptual foundation of this study. Following the theoretical framework, the methodology section will detail the research design, sampling procedures and data collection methods employed. The results chapter will then present the empirical findings, incorporating direct quotations from participants to illustrate their perspectives and expectations. Finally, the conclusion will synthesize the key insights, discuss their implications, and suggest directions for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

The rise of social media has intensified the expectations placed on influencers, as they constantly have the opportunity to like, share, post and react. Unlike traditional celebrities who communicated through interviews and press releases, influencers are subject to constant public scrutiny. This visibility creates pressure to respond to global crises, as audiences expect immediate reactions and alignment with social causes. The nature of social media allows users to voice opinions instantly, leading to heightened demands for influencers to engage in public discourse. The shift from occasional interviews to ongoing digital presence means that influencers must constantly manage their brand identity and authenticity in ways that align with audience expectations.

Audience expectations

To understand what Dutch young adults expect from influencers' social media activity during crises, we first need a clear definition of "audience expectations" in this context. Audience expectations in the social media sphere refer to the implicit and explicit norms that followers hold regarding influencer behaviour—whether it's delivering consistent content, offering valuable information (e.g., discount codes or crisis updates), or taking moral stances during high-profile events. When influencers meet these expectations, they create a sense of congruence that reinforces trust and engagement.

The congruence theory, the cultivation theory

Congruence theory, as explained by Eckstein et al. (1997), posits that stability arises when authority patterns are consistent everywhere. In the context of the digital landscape, social media influencers (SMIs) act as role models or representatives of societal groups (Van Eldik et al., 2019). When influencers meet the expectations of the audience, such as giving them exclusive discount codes, uploading regularly, or speaking out during crises, they reinforce a sense of congruence. However, when influencers remain silent or act against expected social media activity, dissonance arises, leading to audience backlash, loss of trust, and diminished engagement (Eckstein et al., 1997).

Gerbner's Cultivation Theory posits that prolonged and cumulative exposure to media content, particularly television, shapes audiences' perceptions of social reality. According to Gerbner, heavy media consumers tend to adopt a worldview that reflects the dominant messages portrayed in media narratives, often leading to distorted understandings of social norms and realities. One mechanism within this theory, known as mainstreaming, suggests that diverse audience groups converge in their perceptions of reality due to their

shared exposure to media content.

In their study, Gerbner et al. (1973) systematically analysed television content and its effects on audience beliefs and attitudes to explore the impact of long-term mass media exposure. Their findings emphasized that media do not merely reflect reality but actively contribute to shaping it. However, since the early development of cultivation theory, the rise of digital and social media platforms has introduced new dynamics that challenge some of Gerbner's original assumptions (Hermann et al., 2023).

Unlike traditional television, social media platforms are characterized by personalized content feeds and fragmented media consumption, which diverge from Gerbner's premise of uniform media exposure. Gerbner's original argument was based on the observation that most television viewers consumed the same programs at the same times, resulting in the consistent delivery of similar messages across audience segments defined by factors such as age, gender, education, and ethnicity (Gerbner et al., 1980). In contrast, with social media, most users are not exposed to similar, stable messages. Though some content may go viral, and there are influencers with very large audiences, there are far less repetitive and consistent messages, even for heavy users. Compared to mass-media, social media is used highly selectively (Intravia et al., 2017). Also, what people see is individualized, based on people's own social connections, content engagement (liking, commenting, sharing, following), or algorithm. The content, like posts, that one user is exposed to through their connections (followers/friends) does not automatically overlap with the content another user encounters through their own connections (Bakshy et al., 2015).

And yet, while social media do not provide scripted dramatic stories in the style of television, they do allow for the weaving together of different personally created narratives in ways that do ultimately become consistent (Rosenberger et al., 2021). These may not be collectively shared in the same way as television programs but they sustain specific worldviews, shaped by user engagement and participation through discussion and comments (Intravia et al., 2017; Tsay-Vogel et al., 2018; Hermann et al., 2020).

In relation to this study, social media amplifies public scrutiny, particularly during moments of crisis. Audiences increasingly expect influencers to align with dominant crisis narratives, as these narratives become central to the curated media experiences users consume. Consequently, social media not only continues the processes described by Gerbner but also introduces new dynamics of personalization, fragmentation, and intensified public

expectation, thereby reshaping the cultivation of attitudes toward public figures.

Cheng et al. (2021) found that when influencers engage in crisis communication, audiences are more likely to engage in that content by sharing, commenting, and discussing it. When done effectively, influencer-led crisis communication can foster stronger emotional and behavioural commitment, with audiences showing higher willingness to support causes that are promoted by influencers compared to promoted by corporations.

Bar-Tal et al. (2007) discusses the concept of collective emotions, where groups of people share emotional reactions to crises. The article states that a group of people can have any one thing in common, so in the context of SMI, this could be the following of one specific influencer, or the pool of followers of all 'fitfluencers', who post gym- and athletic related content for example. This emotional alignment strengthens expectations for influencers to speak out in moments of crisis. However, when it is noticed that someone does not align with collective emotion, they risk social exclusion, or in the case of SMI, loss of followers and audience engagement.

Uses and gratification theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory helps explain why they expect certain types of content from influencers during crises. Uses and Gratifications Theory posits that individuals actively seek out media channels to fulfil specific needs—such as information-seeking, social connection, or emotional coping (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). In the SMI context, followers expect influencers to deliver these gratifications: for example, when a war breaks out, they may turn to influencers for real-time updates (information seeking), communal discussions (social interaction), and guidance on how to help (information sharing). If an influencer consistently satisfies these needs—providing credible data during climate disasters or sharing survivor stories in sexual harassment scandals—they reinforce audience loyalty and engagement metrics (e.g. shares, comments). Furthermore, users employ social media to engage in collective activism—signing petitions or donating funds—demonstrating how uses and gratification drives both consumption and participatory behaviours when stakes are high. Conversely, failure to address these needs during crises undermines followers' trust and prompts them to seek alternative sources (Whiting & Williams, 2013).

Parasocial interactions, parasocial relationships

We next consider parasocial interaction and relationships. Parasocial Interaction (PSI) describes the momentary, one-sided connections that audiences form when consuming media; Parasocial Relationships (PSR) refer to longer-term, friendship-like bonds developed over repeated exposure (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Klimmt et al., 2006; Konijn & Hoorn, 2017). Strong parasocial interactions and relationships influence how Dutch young adults interpret and react to influencer statements about crises. Followers who perceive strong PSRs with influencers view them almost as trusted friends: they internalize influencers' values and anticipate that those figures will address issues important to the audience. The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis suggests that regular exposure to an influencer's content can shape attitudes—fostering empathy, reducing prejudice, or reinforcing shared values (Schiappa et al., 2005). Thus, when influencers align their messaging with audience expectations—especially during crises—they strengthen PSRs and heighten engagement. If they violate these relational norms, followers feel betrayed, leading to anger, criticism, or unfollowing.

The power of SMIs can go even further. Given their universal presence on social media, the content of influencers can impact social media consumers who come across their posts incidentally (Engel et al., 2023). Thus, even if adolescents have not formed parasocial relationships or actively follow SMIs, exposure to their content can still lead to upward comparison, as these influencers often represent unrealistic body and lifestyle ideals (Sukamto et al., 2019).

Expectancy violation theory

To explain how deviations from audience expectations affect engagement, we apply the Expectation Violation Theory. This theory posits that when an actor (e.g., a corporation or influencer) deviates from an audience's anticipated behaviour—whether positively or negatively—the resulting evaluative response is markedly more intense than when expectations are met. In other words, audiences are relatively indifferent to conformity, but a positive violation (exceeding expectations) or a negative violation (failing expectations) elicits disproportionately strong judgments. Research shows that individuals' affective and behavioural reactions to such violations—ranging from heightened praise to amplified condemnation—outweigh their responses to instances where expectations are simply fulfilled (Burgoon & Hale, 1988; Burgoon, 1993).

Applied to social media, followers expect influencers to respond appropriately during crises—acknowledging a war, amplifying climate activism, or condemning sexual

harassment. When an influencer 'violates' these expectations—by posting irrelevant content during a humanitarian crisis or staying silent on a high-profile scandal—followers perceive a negative credibility breach. Depending on the influencer's status and the severity of the violation, followers may forgive a minor misstep (if the influencer's credibility is high) or engage in severe backlash, including unfollowing and public censure.

Social identity, self-categorization and audience expectations

Social Identity and Self-Categorization theories help us understand how / that Dutch youth often define themselves through group memberships their expectations about influencer stances. Social Identity Theory (SIT) posits that individuals derive self-esteem and identity from membership in socially defined groups, distinguishing themselves from out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Ellemers et al., 2002). Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) explains how individuals classify themselves as part of in-groups based on shared values, norms, and ideologies (Turner et al., 1987). Influencers often function as symbolic in-group representatives: their opinions and behaviours become points on which audiences focus.

Cheng et al. (2021) found that when audiences perceive influencers as leaders in opinion and taste, they will label them as members of their in-group and are more likely to support their initiatives without noticing or resisting persuasion techniques.

In crises, group identities become particularly important: followers seek cues that reaffirm in-group values. Influencers operate as symbolic in-group figures whose stances either reinforce or threaten followers' social identities. When a young Dutch adult identifies with an eco-activist influencer who actively promotes environment friendly behaviour, their shared stance strengthens collective in-group cohesion. Followers then engage in in-group favouritism—amplifying the influencer's content—and out-group derogation—criticizing those who deny climate science or are not environmentally friendly (Rivera et al., 2024). Similarly, during war coverage, if an influencer's stance on geopolitical issues aligns with the audience's national or ethical identity, followers experience validation; if not, they perceive a betrayal. This dynamic demonstrates SIT's premise: individuals maintain self-esteem by upholding positive group distinctions and rejecting perceived deviants (Bar-Tal et al., 2007; Iacoviello & Spears, 2021; Rivera et al., 2024).

In SIT terms, imagined audiences, ingroup favouritism, and collective emotional alignment all reinforce people's social identities. By expecting influencers to mirror group norms, followers validate their own in-group membership and maintain self-esteem through

conformity (Iacoviello & Spears, 2021). In relation to this study, when influencers publicly post a crisis-related stance, followers perceive this as confirmation of shared values, strengthening the 'us' versus 'them' boundary described by Rivera et al. (2024). Conversely, if an influencer's reaction diverges from the emotional consensus of the followers (Bar-Tal et al., 2007), followers interpret this as a threat to group cohesion and their personal identification with the in-group, risking exclusion. Thus, these dynamics illustrate SIT's core premise: individuals strive to protect a positive social identity by rewarding those who uphold perceived in-group norms and excluding those who do not.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives illustrate how audience expectations are grounded in psychological needs, relational bonds, normative judgments, and identity processes. Understanding these expectations is crucial for interpreting how Dutch young adults interpret influencer credibility and decide whether to engage, share, or reject their content. By unpacking these dynamics, we can better predict when and why influencers succeed or fail in meeting the demands of Dutch, young adults during war, climate, and sexual harassment crises.

Gen-Z, Social Media and Public Figures
Gen-Z and social media exposure

Gen-Z (roughly born 1995–2010) is the first generation to have grown up in a digitally connected world (Priporas et al., 2017). Accustomed to technology, they can effortlessly navigate diverse digital innovations, such as the internet, mobile devices, and social networks since early childhood (Francis et al., 2018; Szymkowiak et al., 2021). As one study notes, Gen-Z has little to no memory of the world as it existed before smartphones and social media (Mitchell, 2025). In short, 16–29-year-olds are used to constant social-media immersion from childhood, making them ideal subjects for studies of influencer expectations and effects. Given the years 1995-2010, Gen-Z also officially includes 14- and 15-year-olds. However, since social media only allows people of 16 years and older to create accounts, this study will select participants between the age of 16 and 29.

Another reason this age group is interesting to investigate is that Gen Z (16–29-year-olds) represents a large share of digital media consumers in the Netherlands, and their behaviour often predicts broader social trends. For instance, Deloitte's research emphasizes that younger generations are at the forefront of digital and cultural shifts (Deloitte Global, 2024). Understanding Gen Z's values and online habits is thus essential for businesses, policy makers, or individuals that have a career on social media like influencers. In

marketing terms, Gen Z shows a high responsiveness to influencer-driven messaging: industry reports note that Dutch Gen Z-ers follow influencers closely and are more likely than older groups to trust influencer recommendations for products (Van Eldik et al., 2019). Therefore, this study focuses on Dutch youth, since this group constitutes the primary audience for influencer content and represent the media user for whom influencers and their strategies are most relevant (Deloitte Global, 2024).

Instagram and engagement

The choice to explore participants' expectations on the social platform of Instagram was based on the fact that engagement tends to be strongest on visually rich social apps. For instance, it was established that Instagram is "the most important social media platform for young adults globally" (Newman et al., 2023), and the data of Newcom Research & Consultancy (2025) show that Gen-Z spends the most time on social media and that Instagram is among the top platforms for all ages, alongside WhatsApp and Facebook. Swart and Broersma (2023) note the heavy Instagram use by 16–25-year-olds in the Netherlands. These platforms are where Gen-Z encounters most influencer content, so their expectations of influencers are shaped by experiences on these apps. Instagram's dominance among young people makes it an interesting platform for this study.

Moreover, Instagram is typically viewed as a space for entertainment, self-presentation and social connection (Alhabash and Ma, 2017; Boczkowski et al., 2018), rather than a medium for finding and sharing information (Anter and Kümpel, 2023). Yet, survey research shows that young people are increasingly employing Instagram for news (Newman et al., 2023; Pew Research Center, 2020), in particular for breaking, positive and human-interest news stories (Al-Rawi et al., 2021; Goyanes and Demeter, 2022). These findings make it even more interesting to integrate Gen-Z and Instagram into this study, as it shows how young people turn to Instagram for news-related content.

Social media activity and statements of public figures

Unlike traditional mass media—where audiences rather passively consume a uniform schedule of programming—social media is characterized by individualized content feeds, algorithmic curation, and interactive features. A social media platform, such as Instagram, refers to the broader digital framework that enables users to create, distribute, and engage with content in real time, within user-specific and algorithmically shaped environments. Each Dutch young adult's feed on Instagram is highly personalized, based on social

connections, past engagement, and platform algorithms (Bakshy et al., 2015; Intravia et al., 2017). Interactive elements—likes, comments, shares, direct messaging, live streaming—create constant, real-time feedback loops between influencers and followers. This interactivity accelerates information diffusion and amplifies emotional reactions: a single post about a climate disaster can trigger thousands of comments within minutes, shaping collective sentiment. Consequently, social media platforms intensify both opportunities for influencer-audience bonding, and the expectations placed on influencers during crises (Hermann et al., 2020; Tsay-Vogel et al., 2018).

Public figures—including traditional celebrities and social media influencers—hold positions as opinion leaders on social platforms like Instagram. Within these larger platforms, influencers also construct their own *personal platforms*—highly curated digital spaces (i.e., their social media accounts) where content, tone, and branding are tailored to attract and retain specific audiences. The research of Van Eldik et al. (2019) shows that too much engagement from influencers in social issues can risk alienating part of their audience that is less involved in this subject. However, if they remain silent, they may seem inauthentic to their followers. Influencers must carefully balance engagement and neutrality to maintain their reputation and audience loyalty (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016).

Concerning SMI, branding research shows influencers carefully calibrate their public persona to balance commercial interests and activist signals. Too much activism during a crisis may alienate followers uninterested in that cause; too little engagement may prompt accusations of inauthenticity. Cheng et al. (2021) demonstrate that influencer engagement in corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives—when perceived as genuine—minimizes persuasion resistance and sustains credibility. Thus, public figures' statements during crises become strategic branding decisions: they must align with perceived audience values or face reputational damage.

Media coverage of crisis

Social amplification of risk

Within the social amplification of risk framework, social media platforms serve as "amplification stations" that filter, decode, and reframe these signals, shaping both public perceptions and subsequent behaviours (Kasperson et al., 2022, p. 1368). As opinion leaders, influencers play a crucial role: by selecting which accounts, data visualizations, or personal narratives to highlight, they can intensify or undermine certain societal problems or crises, such as imagery from a war zone or a survivor testimonial in a sexual misconduct scandal.

Furthermore, they have the power to attach normative values that consequently stimulate emotional engagement of the audience. The large followings and the algorithmic boost influencers have through likes, shares and comments, accelerate the diffusion of their posted content, often creating echo chambers where a person only encounters information or opinions that reflect and reinforce their own. This way, influencers not only intensify the perceived risk, but also contribute to secondary impacts, such as international advocacy campaigns, crowdfunding efforts. In doing so, influencers hold the power to transform localized hazards into global movements (Kasperson et al., 2022).

Social identity and self-categorization in times of crises

Because group identity is an important factor in how Dutch young adults judge influencer statements, the Social Identity and Self-Categorization theories will be discussed in the specific context of crises. In crises, group identities become particularly salient: followers seek cues that reaffirm in-group values. Influencers operate as symbolic in-group figures whose stances either reinforce or threaten followers' social identities. When a young Dutch adult (16–29) identifies with an eco-activist influencer who vocally opposes climate denial, their shared stance strengthens collective in-group cohesion. Followers then engage in in-group favouritism—amplifying the influencer's content—and out-group derogation—criticizing those who deny climate science (Rivera et al., 2024). Similarly, during war coverage, if an influencer's geopolitical analysis aligns with the audience's national or ethical identity, followers experience validation; if not, they perceive a betrayal. This dynamic demonstrates SIT's premise: individuals maintain self-esteem by upholding positive group distinctions and rejecting perceived deviants.

Authenticity, emotion and trust

Finally, to explain why Dutch young adults expect genuineness from influencers during crises, we examine Authenticity, Emotion, and Trust theories. Authenticity emerges as crucial currency during crises: followers expect influencers to communicate transparently, express genuine emotion, and provide trustworthy information (Hochschild, 2016; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010). Emotional framing—sharing personal anecdotes, live reactions, or unedited footage—fosters empathy and credibility. For example, an influencer who appears visibly shaken by flood footage can elicit stronger viewer engagement than a detached report. In sexual harassment cases, influencers who share personal connections or amplify survivor testimonials build trust and drive calls for accountability. Conversely, inauthentic or tone-deaf messaging—such as brand-sponsored content during a humanitarian crisis—

erodes trust instantly. Thus, authenticity and emotional resonance are two very important factors to maintain audience loyalty when crises strike.

To illustrate the importance of authenticity and transparency for audience engagement, there is one example seen in the field of financial influencers, or "finfluencers." Research by Van Reijmersdal and Hudders (2023) shows that finfluencers shape financial decision-making behaviours. Investment-related content can either increase uncertainty or encourage risk-taking depending on how influencers present their experiences. According to their study, videos about their own financial losses to counterbalance the 'Hurrah' stories, for example, make finfluencers appear more relatable and credible, influencing audience behaviour. This example illustrates how authenticity and transparency play a key role in audience engagement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this theoretical framework has shown how various psychological, sociological and media theories help explain the expectations of Dutch young adults hold toward the social media activity and crisis communication of public figures. Each theory, such as the congruence theory, the cultivation theory or the uses and gratification theory, contributes to the understanding of the perception and evaluation of influencers. Parasocial relationships and the expectancy violation theory further clarify the emotional and behavioural reactions of audiences when influencers meet, or fail to meet, the expectations set by the audience. the social identity and self-categorization theories illustrate how group affiliation and value alignment intensify these expectations, particularly during times of crises. Lastly, the importance of authenticity, emotions, and trust were discussed as vital conditions to maintain audience engagement. Together, these perspectives provide a framework to analyse how and why Dutch young adults respond to influencer behaviour in the context of crises, such as war, climate change, and sexual misconduct.

Building on the theoretical foundations outlined in the previous section, the study now transitions to its empirical phase. In the following section, the research design, sampling strategy, data collection techniques, and analytical procedures are described, demonstrating how the study operationalizes the concepts discussed earlier to answer the research question.

3. Method

This research employed a qualitative approach to explore audience expectations of influencers on Instagram, focusing on their engagement during times of crisis. A series of focus groups, a method involving guided discussions with a small group of participants to explore their perceptions and attitudes, were conducted to gather insights from Dutch-speaking participants. This approach was particularly suitable as it allowed participants to engage in discussions, express diverse perspectives, and build on each other's thoughts, leading to a rich and nuanced understanding of their expectations (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Furthermore, the focus groups provided insights into the influence of social dynamics and peer interactions on audience expectations of influencers during crises, which would have been more difficult to capture through individual interviews or surveys (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Moreover, the relatively free format of focus groups was also considered adequate since this research is exploratory, meaning there is limited existing research to inform standardized questionnaire designs.

The core of this research was to investigate what the audience expect of influencers on Instagram. In this research, 'expectations' referred to the audience's perceptions of the role influencers should play in crises. In order to investigate these expectations and their context, the people and platforms needed to be specified. Regarding the selection of influencers for the research, the study focused on one micro- and one macro-influencer. This was done in order to find out whether the difference in the number of followers of the influencer had an influence on the opinions and expectations of the participants. These tiers are different in their follower count and, consequently, their impact (Kay et al., 2020). A micro-influencer has 10,000 to 100,000 followers. Regarding the exact number of followers an influencer should have to be considered a micro- or macro-influencer was very diverse. In all reviewed literature, the exact number of followers an influencer should have to be considered a micro- or macro-influencer was very diverse as some studies used multiple tiers with different numbers of followers. This study utilized the research where only two tiers were discussed: micro- and macro-influencers (Park et al., 2021; Kay et al., 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017). The difference in followers, and the size of the platform was more evident to the focus group participants if two influencers from two tiers that are further apart from each other in followers were used. While micro-influencers often have stronger engagement with their followers, macro-influencers can be more effective due to their popularity, their experience as a consistent creator and high awareness. They are inching toward celebrity status and have a broad audience (Kay et al., 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017). The current study

excluded individuals working in the political field, including politicians of any kind and journalists. The reason for this exclusion was because for these professions, it is expected that they would shed light on crises or have opinions on such matters. Instead, the study included other social media influencers who gained their platforms due to skills and hobbies, such as singers, actors, cooks, fitness professionals, or lifestyle promoters. The micro-influencer used for this category was Tom Schimmelpennink. He gained recognition online because he started sharing videos of his life as a fireman. He also appeared in some popular Dutch dating shows, such as 'Lang Leve de Liefde' where he gained quite some recognition as well. As an influencer and fireman, his account mainly includes short vlogs that show his day or his shifts to give his followers an insight into his life. His follower count on Instagram was 69,000 when I conducted the focus groups, placing him in the micro-influencer category. The influencer that was used for the macro-influencer category was Monica Geuze. She got famous because of her daily vlogs that she would post on YouTube between August 2014 and January 2023. She has a popular podcast with her friend Kaj Gorgels, different commercial companies such as Sophia Mae, and also presents some popular TV programs like The Bachelorette, Love Island, and The Masked Singer. At the time of the research, she had just below 1 million followers, categorizing her as the macro-influencer of this study.

These two social media influencers have popular accounts on multiple social media platforms: Snapchat, TikTok and Instagram. This study focuses solely on the accounts they have on Instagram, because the format of this platform allows more social media activity and statements through a combination of videos, photos, and stories. The unique features of Instagram, such as posts, stories, and reels, provided influencers with multiple options for presenting their content. Meanwhile, other social media platforms, such as TikTok and Snapchat, were based on short-form content, X was primarily composed of brief statements, and YouTube's format mainly included long- and short-form video content. When choosing Instagram, the expectation was to create a more diverse conversation in the focus group as the type of response the influencer makes on Instagram regarding the crisis might be of importance for the participants as well. Other platforms are too limited in their posting possibilities. Facebook, while similar in format to Instagram, was not chosen due to the age differences in the target audience of the platforms.

Participant Selection

  The sample for this research consisted of Dutch people between 16 and 29 years old. This age window is split into two groups: youngsters (16-19 years old) and early adults (20-29 years old). This is done due to the possible difference in social media behaviour. It is believed that youngsters have different expectations of social media influencer, since they grew up with social media and its fast-paced innovations. Early adults have been confronted with this technology and social media at a later stage in life and know what it is like to live without it. This difference can cause discrepancy in the expectations participants have regarding social media influencers. Other demographic factors were not specified for participation. However, factors such educational background and gender were noted to see if there would be significant results based on these factors. Convenience sampling was applied in order to reach enough participants to contribute to the research (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021). I made a video and put it on my Instagram story saying I needed people for my research between the age of 16 and 29 and that if they wanted to help it would be greatly appreciated, and if they knew anyone outside of 'our own age range', meaning 20 to 24 years old, it would benefit the research greatly. I got a lot of responses from friends and family saying they wanted to help and had housemates, cousins, or coworkers, who wanted to help as well. I drafted an Excel sheet where people could fill in the dates and timeslots whenever they were available and made the appointments for the focus groups accordingly.

Focus Group Design

  The research employed focus groups as its qualitative method to facilitate discussion among participants regarding their similarities and differences in expectations. This decision stems from the fact that participants are affected by peers a lot. Moreover, participants often enjoy communicating with each other, resulting in different ideas and perspectives in the discussion for both the participants and the researcher (Cameron, 2005). The first and second focus group both included seven participants, the third group consisted of five participants, the fourth focus group had six participants, and the fifth and last focus group included seven participants. The number of participants for each focus group was considered sufficient as it ensured that conversations were dynamic without overshadowing individual voices (Casey & Krueger, 1994). For this research, five focus groups were conducted (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021). Each group included participants from different educational backgrounds and age ranges (see table 1-5).

Table 1; participants of FG1

Focus Group 1	Age	Gender
Speaker 1.1	21	Woman
Speaker 1.2	21	Woman
Speaker 1.3	17	Man
Moderator	-	-
Speaker 1.5	19	Woman
Speaker 1.6	18	Man
Speaker 1.7	16	Man
Speaker 1.8	23	Man

Table 2; participants of FG2

Focus Group 2	Age	Gender
Speaker 2.1	21	Woman
Speaker 2.2	24	Woman
Speaker 2.3	18	Woman
Moderator	-	-
Speaker 2.5	21	Woman
Speaker 2.6	21	Woman
Speaker 2.7	18	Woman
Speaker 2.8	17	Woman

Table 3; participants of FG3

Focus Group 3	Age	Gender
Speaker 3.1	23	Woman
Speaker 3.2	22	Woman
Moderator	-	-
Speaker 3.4	21	Woman
Speaker 3.5	24	Woman
Speaker 3.6	23	Woman

Table 4; participants FG4

Focus Group 4	Age	Gender
Speaker 4.1	24	Man
Speaker 4.2	22	Woman
Moderator	-	-
Speaker 4.4	25	Man
Speaker 4.5	23	Man
Speaker 4.6	22	Woman
Speaker 4.7	24	Man

Table 5; participants FG5

Focus Group 5	Age	Gender
Moderator	-	-
Speaker 5.2	21	Woman
Speaker 5.3	23	Woman
Speaker 5.4	21	Man
Speaker 5.5	23	Man
Speaker 5.6	20	Woman
Speaker 5.7	19	Woman
Speaker 5.8	21	Woman

The study aimed for a roughly equal distribution across education levels within each focus group to provide the conversation with a diversity of perspectives and to prevent overrepresentation of any education group. There were no instances where people cancelled last-minute, so the division was mostly consistent. However, finding the right division to create mixed focus groups based on the criteria was difficult as it was hard to find dates and times where enough people were available to help.

At the start of every focus group, the moderator would give room for small talk. Not all participants knew each other, so giving them the opportunity to talk to each other before starting with discussing more serious topics created a more laid-back atmosphere for the participants and caused them to talk more freely (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021). Before starting the discussions, everyone was asked consent to be recorded and asked if everyone was familiar with the principles of a focus group. To the participants that did not attend

university or have much experience with focus groups, the principles were explained. It was also mentioned that the moderator is not there to be involved in the discussions or ask a lot of questions, but mainly to guide the conversation (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021). The moderator created a topic list to make sure the conversations remained focussed and on-topic (see Appendix B). It was explained to the participants that the moderator created a topic list and what that topic list was for, without showing the participants the topics on the list. Lastly, it was said that if something the moderator or another participant said was not clear or if they had any questions, they could always ask (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021).

Next, a short introduction about the subject of the study was given. This introduction was paired with two or three introductory questions to spark brief conversations in order to give the moderator a sense of the differences in participants' personalities and their ability to share their opinion in group conversations. The questions were on the topic of influencers and expectations, but not focussed enough to be the centre of the focus group right away, for example, "What kinds of influencers do you know?", "What kinds of influencers do you follow?", and "What expectations do you have of influencers?". This approach helped the moderator to identify participants who were or were not as comfortable speaking and to create a more comfortable atmosphere to get accustomed to the group dynamic. After this short warm-up, the two different influencers were introduced. If a participant was not familiar with any of the two influencers, help was asked of one of the participants to show their profile. It was made sure that participants were not shown specific posts from influencers but only their publicly visible profiles because this research examined the expectations that people had regarding what influencers did or did not address, rather than analysing specific statements made by influencers themselves. The most important factor was that the participant was familiar with the influencers shown. Other factors, such as whether the participants follow the influencers was not necessary to participate in the research. Whenever a participant was unfamiliar with the influencer or did not follow them, the moderator would reassure participants that it did not matter for the study whether they knew them to make sure they would not feel as though they could not join the conversation actively.

During the discussions, active listening techniques and non-verbal cues, such as eye contact and nodding, were employed to encourage participants to share their thoughts (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021). Open-ended questions were used to facilitate deeper discussions, and probing questions were asked when necessary to elicit more detailed responses or to make sure the moderator's interpretation would be correct and recorded for

analysis (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021). Dominant participants were prevented from overshadowing others by redirecting conversations and inviting quieter participants to contribute (e.g., "How do others feel about this?"). As a moderator, I did not actively contribute to the discussions, however, if the conversation did not go fluently, the moderator turned to the topic list to guide the conversation further and guide the conversation to a new subject (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021). Most of the conversations flowed naturally and topics were discussed without interference, but if some topics had not been addressed after ten minutes, some questions were asked to guide the conversation to that subject. For example, when participants talked about their expectations of influencers in the context of war, climate change and sexual misconduct and there was no natural mention of the follower count of the influencers and whether that made a difference, the moderator would guide the conversation towards that topic. That way, there was a more complete coverage of the factors that might influence the opinions and expectations of participants. If a participant did not find a factor that was introduced by the moderator important, they would also voice that opinion. Given the sensitivity of the topics, the moderator ensured that discussions remained respectful and that all participants felt heard.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings of the focus group discussions were made with participant consent, and the discussions were transcribed. Content analysis, discussed in Akyildiz and Ahmed (2021), was used to identify, analyse and interpret patterns in the data. Within content analysis, special attention was paid to the frequency of themes and patterns (Braun & Clarke's, 2006). This combination allows the researcher to identify and recurring themes while also quantifying the frequency of these themes. This qualitative approach was deemed suited for this study as it allowed the researcher to explore audience motivations, expectations and perspectives across focus group participants. Adhering to the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), the analysis commenced with familiarizing oneself with the data. In this first phase, the transcripts were read thoroughly, allowing for deep immersion in the content and the noting of initial ideas and recurring elements. In the second phase, initial codes were generated systematically across the entire dataset, serving as labels that captured important and relevant features of the data. The third phase involved generating initial themes by collating the codes into broader patterns of meaning. This step enabled the identification of recurring elements that were central to the research question. For example, if the focus group discussed their thought process behind their expectations of

influencers' responses in crises, it might generate themes like 'social responsibility', 'social media platform', or 'authenticity'. In the fourth phase, these themes were carefully reviewed to ensure their consistency and relevance in relation to both the coded extracts and the overall data set; during this process, themes were merged, split, or refined as necessary. The fifth phase required defining and naming each theme clearly by articulating a detailed narrative of their content and significance. For example, a theme like 'social responsibility' might include participants' expectations that influencers should or should not use their platforms to reach audiences for activist reasons. Finally, in the sixth phase, the analysis was written up by combining the refined themes with illustrative data extracts, thereby supporting the findings and providing a complete narrative that ties the empirical evidence to the research question. The codebook with illustrative examples from the datasets can be seen in Appendix A.

Crisis Topics

In all focus groups, three crises were discussed: war, climate change, and sexual harassment. These topics were deliberately selected due to their influence on and prominence in public discourse and their ability to evoke emotional and social responses. Each topic represents a different aspect of a crisis: geopolitical, environmental and social. Together they provided a broad, covering framework to explore the expectations of participants.

There is a lot of conflict in the modern world, but this study focused on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, as this was widely recognized across educational backgrounds. It is perceived as an immediate threat to European stability and global peace. Compared to other current conflicts, the Russia-Ukraine war appeared to resonate more among the participants. Possibly due to its proximity and extensive media coverage.

Climate change was included, as it includes a long-term, global threat. Although its effects are not always noticed directly in everyday life, the topic often evokes feelings of anxiety, urgency and responsibility. Sexual harassment was selected to include a social crisis that directly involves individual experiences and societal structures. While inherently personal, experiences could reflect broader norms, dynamics and expectations.
Given the sensitivity of these topics, procedures were in place to manage emotional responses during discussions. If participants became distressed, they were given the option to step out of the conversation or take a break. The moderator ensured that all discussions

remained respectful and inclusive, acknowledging different perspectives while maintaining a safe environment.

Lastly, in order to mitigate bias and enhance the reliability and validity of the focus group data, I continually assessed my own positionality as a researcher. By acknowledging potential biases and their possible influence on the collection and analysis of data, I could take steps to minimize their impact. For example, by promoting equal participation, I improved the reliability of the data. Moreover, I maintained a detailed record of the research process, including decisions made during data collection, transcription, and analysis. This allowed for transparency in how findings were derived.

4. Results

To reach saturation, five focus groups were conducted (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021). In the focus groups, participants acknowledged the significant power influencers can have, particularly over younger, impressionable audiences. As Speaker 1.3 stated, *"Influencers and social media in general have a very big influence on the world these days."*[1] a sentiment echoed by Speaker 2.2, who emphasized, *"it is already in the name. Influencers have influence on people... especially on young people who are very impressionable."* This influence, participants felt, comes with responsibility. Speaker 1.3 underlined this directly: *"the bigger your number of followers, the more responsibility one has... people listen to you anyway."* The idea that influencers should use their platforms for good in times of need was widely shared, with Speaker 5.2 saying *"I do expect them to do something with it. Because it is something that is very important and that a lot of people should see."* Followed by a statement regarding the impact and reach that social media has over youth: "*And a platform like Instagram reaches a lot more youth compared to the news, I think."* Similarly, Speaker 5.6 argued that influencers have the unique ability to educate youth, especially if they are less engaged with news and modern problems:

> *"But I think that it would be very good if they would try to influence it, because it is a target group who might be blind for or less engaged with the news and the current problems of the world. So, people will know more about it."*

There was also a strong belief that reach strengthens an influencer's impact as more people are exposed to their content: *"people are also influenced about subjects that are not necessarily the reason they started following the influencer... that is why I think the influencer carries more responsibility."* (Speaker 4.1). Thus far the quotes came from different groups, showing that expectations were cohesive.

Still, participants in several focus groups voiced concern about misinformation that could be spread by influencers. Speaker 3.5 noted: *"What I see a lot with influencers is that there is a great lack of sources. So when an influencer would say something about a crisis, then they will have to be able to back it up."* and Speaker 4.7 emphasized, *"You just don't know who will see your content... you have a certain responsibility to address the right information"* showing that, in the context of crisis situations, collaboration with experts or

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[1] all quotes are interpreted and translated by the researcher from Dutch to ordinary English and are prone to interpretation.

credible sources was preferred. Speaker 5.6 shared: *"I think that it is good that influencers share things about crises on social media, but I don't expect it from them, because they probably don't have enough knowledge about it."* Some participants acknowledged the influencer's role as a gateway, recommending they simply encourage audiences to *"read into it, watch the news"* (Speaker 5.6) rather than attempting to educate in depth. There was no one in any focus group that disagreed with this. All participant either agreed or build upon the arguments of others.

The sense of social responsibility that was voiced when asked what participants expected from influencers was contradicted by expectations once it is centered around crises. Many participants stressed that influencers should only speak on topics that align with their content and personal identity. Speaker 1.6 said:

> *"They should post content for which they are on the platform... I think it is very weird for influencers to post something just because it is a hot topic at that moment while it has nothing to do with their content"* Speaker 3.1 added, *"I don't follow Monica Geuze to know about her political stances or her opinions about climate change."*

Authenticity played the biggest role in how participants judged social media activity in regard to all crises and social media behaviour. Most of the participants stressed that public figures should only speak out if they genuinely care or if it aligns with their usual content or platform behaviour. The idea voiced by participants in the first focus group that content must align with the influencer's usual output was consistently emphasized in the other focus groups as well. For example, speaker 3.2 stated: *"I find it important that it alligns with her account"* and Speaker 3.4 added that if a topic is not consistent across all aspects (daily behaviour, platform behaviour, image, etc), *"then it would not feel authentic."* Performative behaviour, meaning behaviour that occurs largely because of social pressure rather than intrinsic motivation, was a recurring concern. One respondent said, "*it should not look like they do it because they have to.* (Speaker 2.5), while another noted, "you notice when it is sincere and when it is not (Speaker 3.3). Participants expressed frustration with posts that seemed trend-driven or were part of a temporary wave of activism incited by other influencers. They valued follow-up actions, continued engagement, or donations more than symbolic gestures. One participant stated, "*You often see them post something and then go back to their usual content*" (Speaker 5.3), highlighting the fleeting nature of online engagement.

In the analyses, I established the importance of authenticity and sincerity. In ordinary language the meaning of these concepts may overlap. In this research, authenticity referred to alignment between influencers' posts and the image they want to convey. Sincerity referred to doing something, like posting about a crisis, for the right reasons and not because it is expected or for personal gain. Participants often connected these two concepts to the perceived personal relevance of the influencer — for example, a climate activist influencer, a politician, or an influencer who often promotes second-hand fashion speaking about climate change was seen as more authentic and sincere compared to someone who posts about it once and never follows up. The latter would be perceived as worse by the participants if the climate post was done once and the influencer would post about their holidays, new clothes or meat products after. Participants expected influencers to stick to their core content areas, only branching out when it added value. Sudden shifts in content were perceived as forced or inauthentic, suggesting that such actions might be driven by trends or personal gain. There was a consensus that influencers should remain true to their brand and public identity to maintain credibility.

However, sometimes participants felt that influencer's reach was of bigger value than the content of their platform. As Speaker 4.4 states:

> *"It would be hypocritical, but because she has such a large reach, she can still put something good in motion with it... if she would say "buy less new things" there are 1,4 million people who see it, even though she does not do it herself."*

The topic of social responsibility sparked considerable debate among participants in several focus groups, particularly when it came to influencers engaging with political or socially charged issues. While perspectives varied, a common thread was the expectation that influencers, especially those with large or young audiences, should not remain silent during major crises—though how they should speak out remained a point of contention. Several participants emphasized the importance of neutrality and informative content over personal opinion. Speaker 2.3 stressed this clearly: *"I think it is good if she would post something about it. But then i would expect from her that she remains informative and does not go into her own opinion too much."* a sentiment shared by other participants such as Speaker 3.2, who stated: *"I don't think influencers should share their political opinions on their account."* Many participants in the third focus group agreed with this, including Speaker 3.1, Speaker 3.3, Speaker 3.4 and Speaker 3.5, agreed that influencers can raise awareness without necessarily voicing strong personal stances. In another focus group,

speaker 2.5 drew a line between emotional response and action: *"you can also just share that you think it is horrible, but I think that influencers should not voice a strong opinion. Unless that is what your usual content is about as well."* . These opinions were uniform across all focus groups. None of the participants felt that influencers should voice their own opinion or push them onto others, unless their usual content covers the topic.

However, participants also showed how thin the line between social responsibility and inauthenticity can be. For example, Speaker 2.5 said: "*I don't follow influencers for their political opinions. I follow them for entertainment*.", suggesting that influencers should stick to their core content rather than branching into anything related to politics. The idea that content must align with the influencer's usual output was consistently emphasized. Speaker 3.2 stated: *"I think it is important that it fits her usual content,"* and Speaker 3.4 added that if a topic is not consistent across all aspects, *"then it does not feel authentic."*

While the participants were generally on the same page regarding the alignment of content, image and responsibility when talking about their expectations of influencers in general. These expectations differed once they talked about three specific crises. Locally relevant issues like climate change were generally seen as more urgent and appropriate for influencers to address. Speaker 1.2 pointed out: *"because climate change is also happening in our own country. That is something we can influence ourselves."* And Speaker 2.2: *"Climate change is something we all notice more in daily life compared to a war. We notice the problem of climate change way more."* In another focus group, however, not everyone agreed with this argument. For example, Speaker 4.2 mentioned that it would be weird for influencers to start talking about climate change now by saying:

> *"That feels like a continuing subject. That is already in progress. It is not something that has an official starting point. It would be weird if they start to make content about a thing that has been going on for a long time already."*

Suggesting it would be strange for influencers whose content has nothing to do with climate and sustainability to start advocating for it now as that crisis has been going on for a while. In that same sentiment, the participant felt that posting about war would make more sense since that has a relatively more formal starting point.

In contrast, wars in distant regions like Gaza or Ukraine were often perceived as less immediate, politically sensitive, and not necessarily requiring commentary by Dutch influencers. Speaker 1.4 referred to such conflicts as *"een ver-van-je-bed-show,"* indicating

a reduced expectation for local influencers to engage unless they had specific expertise or a direct connection, like ethnicity. Speaker 3.1 illustrated a balanced view by saying: *"only if there would be a big fundraiser from the Netherlands, then I think influencers should post something about it."* However, given the importance of a war, other participants felt that that means influencers should post something about it even though it is not local:

> *"If I follow them, then I would like it if the people I follow would concern themselves with climate change. But I would not mind it as much if they remain silent about climate change. I would care more about the silence if it would be about war, because if there is a fundraiser to raise money to help people there, I would find that more important compared to climate."* (Speaker 3.1).

This difference in expectations can be explained by the statement of Speaker 4.5: *"for me the concept of war weighs more compared to climate change. Climate change feels more casual to talk about or to voice an opinion about as an influencer than an opinion on war."*

In the case of sexual misconduct, however, the consensus was stronger: participants felt this was a universal moral issue with less room for neutrality. That is why, when asked about their opinion, participants did not compare this crisis with the either of the previous two crisis separately but compared sexual misconduct to war and climate change as a whole. For example, speaker 4.6 stated *"because i think everyone agrees that sexual misconduct is a bad thing. Those cases are far less controversial compared to the other two"*. Or speaker 4.5 who said:

> *"I think influencers should speak out actively about sexual misconduct, because I feel it's a problem that could be solved one person at a time. It's a relatively individual-related problem. If there is a consensus that it's bad that it happened, then the problem can be solved easier, I think. With war and climate change it's far more political and needs more collective action."*

Moreover, in focus groups 2, 3 and 4 it became clear that sexual misconduct is not a subject that requires forming a political stance or voicing a personal opinion. Instead, it is seen as a matter of ethical conduct, where influencers are expected to embody responsible behaviour and act as role models by talking about it on social media (Speaker 2.5, 3.5, 4.5, 4.6). In several focus groups it was mentioned that influencers with large followings should speak up about sexual misconduct, to break the taboo. Speaker 1.2 said: *"when an influencer with such a big reach talks about it easily, then hopefully, taboos will be broken with*

younger people. Maybe younger people dare to talk about it sooner, which might have a good influence in the future." In another focus group this was mentioned in a similar way, saying: "when someone with a big reach makes it a topic that can be discussed, then it already helps. It does not matter whether the influencer talks about themselves, someone they know, or a scandal on the news. It always shows that people can talk about it." (speaker 2.6). Speaker 2.3 added to this: "And maybe people who struggle with the experience of sexual misconduct themselves might dare to speak up because of it too." Showing how influencers could have an impact for people with experience with sexual misconduct. Though many participants in the same focus groups (1, 2, 3 and 4) mentioned that the influencers should be careful with their posts, due to the emotional effect it might have on their followers, there was a consensus that personal experience or previous content is less important in the case of speaking out about sexual misconduct (Speaker 1.2, 1.5, 2.2, 2.5, 3.5, 4.5, 4.6). It was noticed that male participants voiced their opinion relatively less compared to the discussions in the focus groups about the other topics. Male participants mostly mentioned that they agreed with what was said and rarely spoke up. This might be due to the emotional weight this subject has and the fact that scandals and news items regarding sexual misconduct mainly involved female victims and male offenders. Still, all quotes came from different groups, showing that expectations were cohesive on the subject of sexual misconduct.

The expectations of participants became even more clear when there were two specific examples to be discussed: Monica Geuze and Tom Schimmelpennink. The themes of responsibility and authenticity remained important in all focus groups, as many participants mentioned that any influencer should stay within the lines of their usual content to be credible; *"it is important with climate change that it aligns with their content in some way. In order for them to be authentic."* (Speaker 5.6, 5.7, 5.8). Similarly, when influencers would post about subjects that do not fit their image or previous platform behaviour, participants would feel skeptical about the intentions of the influencers: *"if an influencer suddenly starts talking about sustainability, it feels as though they do this because it is trendy."* (Speaker 2.4). With regard to Monica Geuze, most participants felt that a lifestyle-influencer like her does not hold the responsibility to be the voice for loaded political matters. For example, speaker 1.8 mentioned: *"would you take Monica Geuze seriously if she starts talking about the war? ... and if an influencer should speak up about the war, then I think Tom Schimmelpennink would have a bigger impact, because he is a fireman.".* Suggesting that

there are relatively lower expectations of an influencer when their target group or content is not focused on the subject in the first place. At first, there was a difference in opinions and expectations between participants. However, as the discussion went on, participants gave each other insights they did not think of beforehand. For example, after the statement of speaker 1.8 saying it might be logical for Tom to speak up due to his profession, the opinions of others started to change as well. Tom Schimmelpennink is a fireman, making his image more credible when discussing humanitarian crises. Moreover, a lot of participants mentioned that they would not want to see too much crisis content from Monica Geuze, as they follow her for light-hearted content and entertainment.

In terms of sustainability and climate change, credibility continues to play a role. As speaker 1.1 mentioned: *"Monica Geuze, if I'm correct, has a clothing line. So, is she environmentally aware herself? And is she the person to tell us to live more sustainable?"* suggesting that followers would question her behaviour and personal choices when she would advocate for the environment. However, the minute it would fit her content, the expectations would change entirely. Most participants expect Monica Geuze to speak up if it fits her image or platform behaviour. *"if it fits her image then I do expect her to speak up. But if she starts posting about the environment or Israel then I don't see how that is any of her business."* (speaker 5.7).

Tom Schimmelpennink, although not as known by the participants compared to Monica Geuze, held more responsibility according to the participants of this study. His profession as fireman was seen as a source of credibility, because of the societal matters he could talk about such as safety precautions and preparations in case of fires (climate change) or war. Speaker 5.2 said: *"I think as a fireman, it would be good to say something. Because his profession has changes drastically because of climate change in a lot of parts of the world."* This sentiment was supported by participants in other focus groups with Speaker 3.2 saying *"I think that Tom could very well post that he bought the emergency package and talk about what that entails. I think he could go into all the safety aspects."*.

Lastly, regarding sexual misconduct, the expectation of most participants was that influencers are greatly responsible for creating awareness and providing mental support on their platform, especially when they have a young target group. Not all participants thought they should share their own experiences or opinions about it, for example, Speaker 1.2 said: *"I don't expect an influencer to only speak about sexual misconduct if they have experience with it, because I really hope they don't. But I expect them to use their reach to give the right example"* Though everyone thought that it would strengthen the sentiment or movement

sufficiently if they would share their experience or, if there is a scandal at hand, relate to that case.

>"*If there is an actual case related to the problem, then people can relate to it more compared to anti-harassment statements alone. (…) if you can relate to it with a case then it will also spread faster, because the spread of information will go faster if it is driven by emotions. If something touches you emotionally, then you will talk about it faster with others.*" (Speaker 5.6).

When comparing Monica Geuze and Tom Schimmelpennink in the context of sexual misconduct, opinions on their responsibilities varied across focus groups. Speaker 1.4 said:

>"*They both have the position to reach a lot of people. And when I compare Monica and Tom, I think Monica has more responsibility due to the fact that she has a broader reach. Moreover, her followers include a lot of young girls, who I think will relate to this problem a little more, unfortunately, compared to the followers of Tom Schimmelpennink.*"

Suggesting Monica's reach and target group is the reason she might has to speak up about this crisis more. Speaker 1.1 said

>"*I think I would listen to Monica about sexual misconduct and think "you are absolutely right" and when I listen to Tom I don't think I would react the same. I know that's not right, but it's my experience that men are usually the problem in these situations. So I would trust a woman about it faster than a man. And I think a lot of girls would too.*"

Adding that apart from reach and target group, gender would matter too in the context of this crisis.

In addition to the differing views regarding what influencers should say, and when, there was also quite some discussion in all focus groups on whether silence in the face of major crises—whether war, climate change, or sexual misconduct—should be the default. Participants mentioned that misalignment with previous content, or the sense of sincerity and authenticity could ruin the message an influencer wants to get across. On the other hand, other participants mentioned that while not every influencer is expected to become a spokesperson, they believed influencers should at least acknowledge serious events and use their platforms to inform or guide. In the words of Speaker 2.1, *"if an influencer has a very*

large reach and you can do something, then you can help a lot of people... but you should be clear about why you're doing it." This reflects a nuanced but clear expectation: influencers can play a role in social discourse, but they must do so thoughtfully, transparently, and within the boundaries of their usual content. Moreover, the possibility of backlash as a reason to remain silent was acknowledged by many. A lot of participants mentioned that public figures might avoid controversial topics out of fear of losing followers or brand deals. Still, most believed that staying silent due to fear was less admirable than taking a risk to say something meaningful. If the influencer decided to remain silent on a topic, it would be more beneficial to share the reason why instead of saying nothing at all. Speaker 4.1 said:

> *"For me it is more logical to remain silent because of the large reach an influencer has containing a lot of people with a lot of different opinions. And to say that you're not taking a stance, because you don't want to impose your opinion on others."*.

Though the other participants in this focus group felt that it is better to speak up to create awareness, they did agree with speaker 4.1, as long as the influencers voice the reason why they remained silent.

As aforementioned, sincerity and authenticity play a vital role in the expectations of the participants. These factors were questioned even more when it came to the commercial side of influencers. Participants were highly critical of influencers who appeared to engage with social issues for personal gain, whether through financial compensation or increased visibility. Speaker 1.8 articulated this concern clearly: *"what I mainly expect of an influencer in this situation is that they don't benefit from their actions in any way. Any money they would earn with their posts about the crisis should go to a good cause."* This statement highlights the ethical expectation that influencers should not profit from crises. If they do profit from their posts about a crisis, they should reinvest that compensation into the cause they advocate for. For many, paid collaborations on sensitive topics compromised authenticity. For example, when the government starts a campaign against sexual misconduct and wants to collaborate with influencers to reach more people, participants like Speaker 3.4 express skepticism about influencers' motivations when they benefit from a post financially: *"but then I would get the idea that they are being paid for their efforts... because the influencer would think oh it is a current problem, I should do it to. Then I would not trust their motives."* Similarly, in another focus group, Speaker 2.4 also questioned the sincerity behind sudden activism: *"I don't think it is very sincere. I would think they do it for attention*

or money." These statements were not contradicted aside from a statement in the first focus group mentioning the advantage of visibility of a crisis or societal problem after an influencer posts about it, aside from the personal gain the influencer may earn with it.

When an influencer has a higher number of followers, the expectations participants had of influencers also slightly changed. These expectations generally centered on the idea that the influencers with a large follower count must be especially careful when it comes to sharing misinformation and conduct themselves sensibly as they speak to a big range of people with different backgrounds. Many participants elaborated that influencers ought to act as role models in moments of crisis. One participant stated, "*they have a large reach, so what they say matters*" (Speaker 4.3), showing how influencers are expected to maintain awareness and consistency in their messaging, due to their large audiences.
As one participant noted, "*if you're going to say anything, then you have to be able to back it up*" (Speaker 1.5) emphasizing that broader reach brings higher stakes and increased scrutiny. Aside from personal gain as a motive to post about crises, participants expressed their concern about performative behaviour. One respondent cautioned, "if you say anything about the climate, but remain silent about Gaza, then it feels hypocritical" stating that speaking out about one crisis will increase expectations about your platform behaviour in regard to other crises. However, this opinion was not shared a lot in other focus groups. In other focus groups the difference in crisis resulted in differences in expectations. A few participants across the focus groups argued that sometimes silence is preferable to posting something uninformed or insincere. However, most participants agreed that the platform could always be a source of open conversation and communication; Speaker 5.2 said: "*influencer should always play a role in opening a conversation. Raise awareness and make it a conversation.*"

The political dimensions of impact that influencers may have introduced additional ethical dilemmas for the participants. Most participants clearly argued that influencers should always refrain from voicing their political stance or societal opinions and instead "*they should be able to give information regarding the important subjects*" (Speaker 1.2) and expressed caution regarding the power imbalance intrinsic to their platforms. For instance, one respondent warned, "you do have some kind of power position... once you take a stance, people will follow…" (Speaker 4.1). However, one participant clarified the dilemma by stating, "*if you really stand behind an opinion, and you know what you're talking about, then I think an influencer should be able to voice their opinions.*" (Speaker

1.1).

The discussion in the focus groups consistently linked follower count to the level of responsibility the influencer has. Participants think that influencers with larger platforms carry greater weight not only because they can reach wider audiences, but also due to the moral and communicative expectations that are consequently placed upon them: Speaker 1.3: "…the bigger your following, the more responsibility you have. If you have enough followers, it does not matter what you say then, people will listen anyway." Moreover, another participant explained, "International influencers like Mr. Beast automatically carry more responsibility, because they have a reach that is worldwide." (Speaker 1.3), underscoring that global visibility brings global accountability. This sentiment was further echoed when another participant in that focus group remarked, "when people have a global reach, then that reach will weigh more than other factors (such as previous content) because of their potential impact" (Speaker 1.8). One respondent added nuance to this statement in the focus group by saying "International influencers might have more reach, but I would still want them to have and share the right information" (Speaker 1.1), highlighting that though informed messaging of influencers was already considered to be very important by participants, this became even more important when the reach became international. Furthermore, some participants suggested that in times of crisis, reach can sometimes outweigh content consistency or expertise. As one speaker observed, *"you can say that you don't take people like Kim Kardashian seriously, but at a bigger scale, people do listen to her"* (Speaker 1.2), while another argued that when entire countries are influenced: *"when you're able to influence people in those countries (like North-America) solely because of your reach, then that reach will weigh way more to me than any other factor like profession or previous content"* (Speaker 1.8).

The principle of parasocial relationships, where followers often feel emotionally connected to influencers, perceiving them as relatable figures who share their struggles, aspirations, and values also played a role in the expectations that participants had. Participants repeatedly emphasized the strength and complexity of parasocial relationships, due to the one-sided emotional connections followers form with influencers. These bonds were seen as powerful, sometimes even more influential than real-life social interactions. Speaker 2.5 noted, *"I think that influencers sometimes underestimate how strongly people feel connected to them. Which can be a positive thing, but also very dangerous when they share the wrong information for example."* This emotional closeness, participants explained,

can lead followers to adopt influencers' views without critical thought or self-reflection. Speaker 1.3 captured this by saying: *"...a lot of people watch her videos and really like her and go along with her opinions."* Speaker 1.2 linked influencer posts to personal discussions they had with friends and family: *"the same way you can also do that with friends and family, start a healthy discussion."* suggesting that when influencers present their opinions transparently, their influence can spark critical thinking rather than passive agreement as this already happens in their ordinary interactions between family and friends.

Apart from the emotion that comes with parasocial relationships, the effect of emotion appeared to have a broader impact as well, for example, influencers speak about emotionally sensitive or traumatic topics such as war or sexual misconduct. Speaker 5.6 warned of the dangers of sharing overly graphic or emotionally triggering details online, especially for younger audiences or victims: *"it is quite damaging to be able to see and hear the most horrifying details of a crisis while people might not even want to."* This shows the tension between raising awareness and unintentionally causing harm, particularly when followers are emotionally invested. At the same time, emotional resonance was also seen as a driver of awareness and engagement. Speaker 5.6 added, *"spread goes through emotions. If something touches you emotionally, you will tell others about it faster."* Thus, while parasocial bonds can enhance impact, they also amplify the responsibility influencers have when choosing what to share and how.

Despite differences in tone, many agreed that even small actions can be impactful, as long as they are sincere. Speaker 3.1 suggested that a simple story post could suffice: *"you don't have to share entire videos about it but sharing it once could already be sufficient."* Abrupt, out-of-place posts were often seen as confusing or insincere. Speaker 2.2 highlighted this discomfort: *"it would also be a little out of the blue if an influencer would suddenly put a 'Free Gaza'-post on their account. Especially if they continue with a beauty product review after."* Several participants suggested that influencers should stay close to their core content. If the crisis was universally important or the influencer really wanted to share something they could provide links to more informed sources. As Speaker 1.6 explained: *"if it is a really important or pressing subject, then they can post a story with a link to an account or site that concerns that subject."* Speaker 2.1 added in another focus group that it's not just about posting, but also about showing genuine engagement: *"an influencer should also show that interest across their account, otherwise it would come across as a post so they earned their money."*

When the content and platform behaviour of an influencer is not concerned with politics or crisis related subjects, many participants preferred a light-hearted, low-barrier approach—such as sharing stories or links to informative resources—rather than dramatic opinion posts. Speaker 4.1 noted,

> *"What I notice a lot is that influencers repost a regular post on their story. That is what I am seeing of Free Gaza now too. They already made the post weeks ago but want to share it again. Using the story can work as a reminder that way."*.

In another focus group, Speaker 2.2 echoes this thought by saying: "*if the subject is relevant, then I would think it is weird if influencers post something about is. Especially if it is in a way that fits their regular content; in a funny or light-hearted video or something.*", indicating that small, well-placed actions can still spark meaningful engagement.

Moreover, influencers were encouraged to collaborate with credible organizations or official bodies, like the government, and to start small and scale gradually. Speaker 5.3 proposed:

> *"If you make it small and compact, then it will seem more authentic and sincere. Maybe that way it will be better known nationally as well. It is more relatable if it comes from a local source or influencer compared to Monica Geuze."*

Creativity was also welcomed, especially when content could be woven naturally into the influencer's identity. Speaker 2.3 suggested fashion influencers could integrate social messages into their own format: *"for example, by showing that people can do something else with their old pair of paints instead of throwing it away and buying a new one."*

In conclusion, these results show that while influencers are undeniably powerful figures in shaping public opinion and raising awareness, their impact is deeply dependent on authenticity, alignment with personal content, and the manner in which they engage with crises. Participants emphasized that influencers carry varying degrees of responsibility depending on their reach, content consistency, and the composition of their audience. They are expected to act thoughtfully, avoid performative or commercially driven activism, and prioritize sincerity over visibility. Although silence can be justified in certain contexts, transparency about that silence is preferred. Ultimately, influencers who wish to contribute meaningfully to social discourse must do so in a way that is informed, emotionally mindful, and true to their platform identity.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals that Dutch young adults place significant importance on authenticity, consistency, and alignment when evaluating influencers' responses during crises. Trust and long-term loyalty are cultivated when influencers' statements align with their established values and audience expectations—a finding strongly supported by Congruence Theory and Expectancy Violation Theory. Influencers like Monica Geuze and Tom Schimmelpennink were positively received when their crisis messaging was congruent with their usual content and personal brand, while actions seen as opportunistic or trend-driven elicited skepticism. Notably, a large follower count did not compensate for a perceived lack of authenticity or inconsistency.

Methodologically, focus groups played a pivotal role in shaping these insights. Participants described influencers not merely as entertainers but as media figures with social responsibility, especially as many audiences now rely on them for news and societal updates. The discussions highlighted two dominant themes—reach and authenticity. Influencers with broader audiences were expected to maintain higher levels of transparency, consistency, and subject-matter expertise. Yet, participants emphasized that authenticity should prevail over pressure to speak, particularly during crises. While some expected influencers to always voice opinions, others felt silence was preferable to inauthentic or ill-informed communication.

Participants showed a nuanced understanding of influencer behaviour during critical events, resisting what they perceived as performative activism and expressing wariness toward messaging that seemed opportunistic or inconsistent with an influencer's established image. This aligns with Uses and Gratifications Theory, as audiences actively seek content that serves specific emotional, informational, or entertainment-related needs. When influencer messaging failed to meet those needs, satisfaction and trust diminished.

The findings of this study closely align with multiple elements of the theoretical framework, underscoring how crucial consistent, authentic communication is for influencers during crises. Congruence Theory and Expectancy Violation Theory were especially evident, with participants expressing strong trust in influencers whose crisis-related messaging seamlessly reflected their established personas, such as a fireman discussing safety measures during climate emergencies, while even minor deviations from this expected identity often triggered intense negative reactions and diminished credibility (Burgoon & Hale, 1988; Burgoon, 1993; Eckstein et al., 1997). Although Cultivation Theory, which

emphasizes the gradual shaping of social reality through long-term media exposure (Gerbner et al., 1973), was less evident in the dynamic, personalized realm of social media (Hermann et al., 2023), the authenticity and previous content of influencers proved far more influential. Similarly, while some participants briefly acknowledged the potential of parasocial interactions in fostering a sense of human connection, these one-sided relationships did not play a dominant role in the discussions compared to the demands for real-time, authentic, and reliable information. In contrast, Uses and Gratifications Theory was strongly supported, as participants voiced that they actively sought content that fulfilled their specific needs for entertainment, timely updates, and emotional support—misalignment between their needs and the content of the influencer led to reduced satisfaction (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). Furthermore, the Social Amplification of Risk framework was indirectly reflected in how even brief, crisis-related posts from influencers with large followings could rapidly magnify public sentiment, whether by boosting awareness or inciting backlash. Finally, although Social Identity and Self-Categorization theories offered a lens for understanding how influencers could resonate with personal or cultural identities and was expected to play a prevalent role in the discussions, participants' responses remained focused on the authenticity and of reach of influencers, which together played a critical role in shaping trust and reinforcing audience expectations during critical moments.

Implications of findings

These findings offer practical implications. For influencers, platform designers and marketers, these results underscore the need to design systems that support authentic, transparent content rather than performative or trending outputs. It can help institutions who are aiming to develop and implement campaigns on crisis matters effectively. Theoretically, this research contributes to the literature by demonstrating the interplay between audience expectations, perceived authenticity, and influencer credibility, particularly within a Dutch media landscape.

Limitations

While the number of participants was sufficient and the sample was diverse in gender and age, the sample was primarily drawn from the researcher's personal network which may affect generalizability. The focus group method, while effective in surfacing shared norms, may have suppressed more intimate or emotionally nuanced reflections—particularly concerning parasocial relationships. A mixed-method design combining group discussions with in-depth interviews could yield richer insights into individual-level experiences and

emotional investments in influencers.

Additionally, demographic analyses revealed no systematic patterns related to age, gender, or ethnicity, though slight gender-based differences emerged in conversations around sexual misconduct. Male participants tended to be less engaged in such discussions, possibly reflecting broader gendered dynamics in media representation. Future research could explore whether these patterns hold in different cultural contexts or across generations, where social media engagement and expectations toward influencers may differ significantly.

Finally, while the selection of Monica Geuze and Tom Schimmelpennink offered a useful contrast in terms of gender, professional background, and content type, anchoring the discussions around these two public figures may have constrained the diversity of responses. Although participants discussed other influencers, their expectations remained relatively consistent. Broader research across different influencer types and platforms—including micro-influencers and those from various cultural settings—would help determine the generalizability of these findings.

Ultimately, this research sheds light on the evolving relationship between influencers and their audiences, particularly in times of crisis. Rather than relying on follower count alone, audiences increasingly demand thoughtful, authentic, and context-aware communication. These insights not only contribute to academic understanding of influencer culture but also offer practical guidance for influencers, companies, and institutions managing complex expectations and digital influence.

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7. Appendix
Appendix A: Coding frame

Theme	Definition	Codes	Example
Information & knowledge sharing	This category covers how influencers are expected to share well-grounded, accurate and balanced information. It includes notions of providing correct knowledge, avoiding or combating misinformation. Ensuring context and neutrality while aligning what is shared with both the influencer's own interests/expertise and the needs of their audience	knowledge, misinformation, right information, informative, context, neutrality, opinion vs objectivity, alignment with influencer, alignment with followers, platform usage strategy	If you, as an influencer, or with a huge reach like Kim Kardashian, you will help a lot of people. But then I also think that you have to be very informative. And it must also be clear what it all means. And that you make clear as to why you are doing it. And that you don't just share a link with just a repost from Free Palestine or something like that. Make sure you know about it and educate your followers properly if you choose to speak up.
Influence and responsibility	This theme relates to the perceived duty of influencers to use their platform responsibly. It explains how their actions or posts can have important consequences for their audiences and includes ideas about the position of a role model, support and the broader social impact.	responsibility, influence & impact, social responsibility because of platform, consequence of (in)action, expectations, role, role model, support, change	It's in the name anyway. Influencers simply influence people. Also with the TikTok generation and so on, you have a lot of young people who are just very impressionable
Identity and authenticity	this category captures issues of personal identity as expressed through the content of an influencer. It includes how relatable and authentic a personality comes across and the	authenticity & relatability, public identity, gender, experience, personal, alignment with	Do you take Monica Geuze seriously when she talks about that war? It is not her target group. It's not her content. And when you suddenly talk about war, she's right,

		followers, alignment with influencer, credibility, personal benefit	but it doesn't make sense. Then I think Tom Schimmelpennink can make a bigger impact. Because he already has a social job. And so it goes more towards that subject than the Monica Geuze. She will rarely if ever say anything about it.
	consequences this has when sharing crisis-related posts. Gender and lived experience are also critical to how authenticity is perceived.		
Audience	This theme deals with the relationship between influencer and audiences. It concerns whom the influencer is targeting, why followers are drawn to certain content (like emotional and personal appeals), and issues related to oversharing or personal benefits of sharing posts.	target audience, follower motivation, parasocial, personal benefit, platform usage strategy, oversharing, expectations, emotional appeal	I think influencers sometimes underestimate how strongly people feel connected to them. That can be positive, but also dangerous if they share incorrect information.
Politics and social issues	This theme covers discussions where influencers are criticized for taking stands on political issues. It encompasses views on political neutrality versus advocacy, issues around taboo topics and the balancing act between freedom of speech and social responsibility	political stance, taboo, freedom of speech, right vs wrong, social responsibility, emotional appeal	As an influencer, should you interfere with which political parties people should vote for...? I don't think so, but you can provide information about which topics are actually important for this country.
Content and platform behaviour	This code group is about the type of content influencers produce and how they use their digital platforms. It includes discussion of content consistency, alignment with one's usual posts, and the practical mechanics of platform	previous content, platform usage strategy, entertainment, algorithm, timing, spreadability	Yes, but I actually think it is very personal per influencer whether I would expect it or not. So, for example, if you follow someone who is very involved in politics and they don't say anything about it, then I

	behaviour (such as algorithm, timing of posts, and spreadability).		think it is weird because I follow you for political news. But I don't follow Monica Geuze to know her political opinions or her opinions about the environment.
Status and reach	This theme involves the influencer's professional role, how many followers they have and how that reach interacts with their impact and responsibility. It considers the expectations places on influencers because of their local or international visibility and how reach can sometimes overshadow substance of the content.	professional role & status, reach/follower count, reach vs profession (importance), personal benefit, credibility, influencer examples, local, international differences,	If you get those countries (North America) influenced purely because you have such a large reach, then reach really matters more to me than any other factor such as your own content or work.
Differences between crises	This theme focuses on whether - and how - an influencer's behaviour should differ when addressing crisis topics (war, climate change or sexual misconduct). It also considers how the context of a crisis (immediacy, local vs global, political vs social) shapes the expectations of followers regarding the influencer's platform usage. it sometimes includes discussion of the need for collaborations with experts or official bodies like the government.	platform usage strategy, content, crisis differences, consequence of (in)action, collaboration with knowledge (state/government)	For me it is also an argument to speak out more actively about this in this situation. Because sexual misconduct is a problem that you can solve per person, so to speak. That ultimately comes down to one person. So if at some point there's a general consensus of, okay, this is really bad... then the problem can be solved more easily. While climate policy and war are problems that require much more political action. But as an individual you have much less influence on that, I think... compared to sexual misconduct.

Appendix B: Topic list

- What kind of influencers do you follow (categories)
- Who do you follow (person specific)
- General expectations of influencers
- Expectations of influencers in relation to war
- Expectations of influencers in relation to climate change
- Expectations of influencers in relation to sexual misconduct
- Follower count, does it make a difference?
- Previous content
- Profession / side activities
- Social media activity or statement? Does the type of response matter?
- What if there is no response? Would it have consequences?
- Is there an international difference? I.e does it make a difference when an influencer has an international reach/different nationalities in their following base.
- Can influencers ever do it right?

Appendix C: Use of Generative AI

Examples of prompts used for this thesis:

- *Are all questions well and fluently integrated in the existing text?* These prompts were used for several sections in the thesis to make sure all questions gotten through feedback sessions were sufficiently integrated in the new version.
- *My supervisor says this about the text above: "in this section you describe your application of TA, but you do not refer to the (clear-cut) distinction in steps by Braun & Clarke." How can I include these six steps of the Braun and Clarke article in a clear way?* I used this in only one specific part, since I had trouble finding the right words to explain all the steps clearly.
- *Is this text academic and clear enough for a master thesis?* Or: *can you check the wording, grammar and spelling of this text to make sure it fits the level of a master thesis?*
- *How can I make the contrast between political and setting the right example clearer?* I sometimes got feedback saying the distinctions between expectations or their explanations were not clear. I asked AI for ways I could make it clearer.
- *What is a good heading for this section?*
- *Is this a good way to describe the scientific relevance of the study? How can I improve it?*
- *What are theories and previous research that utilize the relevance of social media in times of crisis regardless of the business aspects?* This is an example of the prompts used for the theoretical framework to guide me to some articles or relevant theories for this study.
- *What parts of this results section are more fitted for the conclusion section? Please*

divide the parts of this text that are more suited for the conclusion section.
- *Provide a list of possible labels for a codebook about this subject.* AI was rarely used in the analysis phase of the thesis. This is the only prompt I made to give me some ideas of possible labels that are not too broad or too narrow.