

The Impact of Perceived Brand Control on Influencer Authenticity and Gen Z Consumer Engagement

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Abstract

This study investigates how perceptions of brand control affect influencer authenticity and how perceptions of brand control shape consumers in Generation Z (Gen Z). Since influencer marketing has become increasingly important to brands, there has been concern about the naturalness of influencers amid growing brand interference. The research examines the impact of having different levels of brand control, based on content, messaging, and sponsorship disclosures, on activation of perceived authenticity of influencers. It also examines the mediating role of negative emotions in the relationship between perceptions of brand control and influencers' avoidance among Gen Z consumers. Quantitative research was employed, with a structured online survey administered to 400 Gen Z social media users. Findings from regression analysis indicated that high brand control, as a factor, significantly decreased perceptions of influencer authenticity and elicited negative emotions, which, in turn, served as a mediator of avoidance behavior. The results have valuable implications for brands, influencers, and policymakers, who should strike a balance between branding and independence to shape credibility and trust. This study adds to the existing body of research on influence marketing by showing a deeper psychological process through which brand control influences Gen Z consumers' behavior.

Keywords: Perceived Brand Control, Influencer Marketing, Influencer Avoidance, Gen Z.

Introduction

Social media has significantly changed the marketing and consumer behavior paradigm. Influencer marketing has become a powerful tool for brands to reach their audiences, build brand awareness, and sell (Agustian et al., 2023). Collaborative strategy is a strategy in which you join forces with people who have a massive fan base and great influence within a particular online community. We refer to them as influencers because they create and share content to promote a product, service, or brand to their followers (Leung et al., 2022).

Generation Z (Gen Z), born in the mid-1990s and early 2010s, is one of the most important consumer segments (Thangavel et al., 2022). Gen Z is, first and foremost, a digital native, having spent their whole lives surrounded by technology and social media; therefore, they are easily susceptible to and discerning of online marketing tactics (Yağmur, 2024). They also like authenticity, transparency, and genuine engagement with the brands they choose to sponsor. They are also a major consumer base with their very own preferences and behavior (Venes & Duarte, 2025). The generation of this time is aware of its smart online behavior and demands authenticity and transparency from brands and influencers alike (Xu, 2023).

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The validity of influencer marketing depends on the influencer's believability. In influencer marketing, authenticity refers to the extent to which an influencer is perceived as authentic, honest, and true to who they are (Zniva et al., 2023). If consumers believe an influencer is authentic, they are more likely to trust related recommendations and may engage with the promoted content. The level of control exercised by the brand is a critical factor that can play an influential role in juicing up an authentic influencer audience (Okonkwo & Namkoisse, 2023).

Brand control is a very nuanced term that arguably refers to the degree to which consumers perceive a brand as dictating a post's message and content (Lariba, 2023). With brands taking advantage of influencer marketing, brands begin to have more control over influencers or the level of control. This also increases brand control, allowing the messages to be more coherent and aligned to brand values (Usta, 2023). However, too much control backfires, as there is a perception of inauthenticity.

Although the impact of influencer marketing has been increasingly recognized, there are still gaps in our understanding of the relationships among perceived brand control, influencer authenticity, and consumer engagement, especially from a Gen Z perspective (Gohil et al., 2025). Past studies have recognized the significance of brand control. However, they have mostly treated this factor as a unidimensional construct (Pradhan et al., 2023; Łaszkiewicz, 2022). In fact, brand control can be exercised through content, messaging, creative execution, and sponsorship disclosure. There is more work to be done to explore these dimensions of brand control and unpack their influence on influencer authenticity (Feng et al., 2023).

Some studies have examined the direct effect of perceived inauthenticity on consumer behavior (Hoppner et al., 2026; Safeer et al., 2023), but fewer have examined the psychological mechanisms underlying this relationship. Yang and Battocchio (2021) suggest that negative emotions, such as distrust, skepticism, and a sense of being manipulated, played a central mediating role in linking perceptions of brand control and consumer engagement.

The current study aims to examine the influence brand control has on influencer reputation and Generation Z social media involvement. This primary objectives of this study includes (1) To examine the relationship between perceived brand control and influencer authenticity as perceived by Gen Z consumers, (2) To investigate the mediating role of negative emotions (such as distrust and skepticism) between perceived brand control and influencer authenticity, and (3) To assess how negative emotions mediate the relationship between perceived brand control and Gen Z's engagement with influencers.

By addressing the above objectives, this research offers a clearer understanding of how perceived brand control influences influencer authenticity, particularly in the Gen Z context. Moreover, this study provides insights into how a brand's transparency and authenticity in marketing affect consumers' perceptions of an influencer's authenticity and, in turn, can help brands develop more transparent and authentic marketing campaigns.

Literature Review

The link between how firms manage influencers and how genuine their content appears has different aspects. Before releasing content, influencer partnerships must follow brand guidelines to build trust with their audience (Amrita, 2025). Overcontrolling by brands creates doubt among followers, who see the influencer as a "brand puppet." When consumers perceive excessive brand influence, they naturally respond with distrust (Mal et al., 2018). Their resulting reaction could involve lower engagement or lead them to avoid the contacted influencers. The extent of brand control shapes what Gen Z consumers believe about influencer authenticity, as this age group demands truthfulness and openness. Companies need to control influencer content in limited ways to help consumers trust recommendations while seeing helpful brand ideas (Filali-Boissy et al., 2025). Based on the above literature, it is hypothesized

that:

H1: Perceived Brand Control negatively influences Influencer Authenticity as perceived by Gen Z consumers.

Negative emotions about brand control determine how much a customer trusts the influencer (Bigné et al., 2023). Consumers who sense high levels of brand control tend to develop mistrust and skepticism. Consumer reactions to these feelings stunt the influencer's credibility and push consumers away (Panigyraki & Polyportis, 2024). Research demonstrates that negative feelings between consumers and influencers explain when high brand control fails, leading to disinterest on both sides (Hudders et al., 2022). When influencers create scripted or commercialized content, it triggers negative emotions among their audience, which impacts their trustworthiness. The impact of negative emotions on customer reactions drives companies to mix exercise of power with originality in influencer marketing (Weinlich & Semerádová, 2022). Based on the above literature, it is hypothesized that:

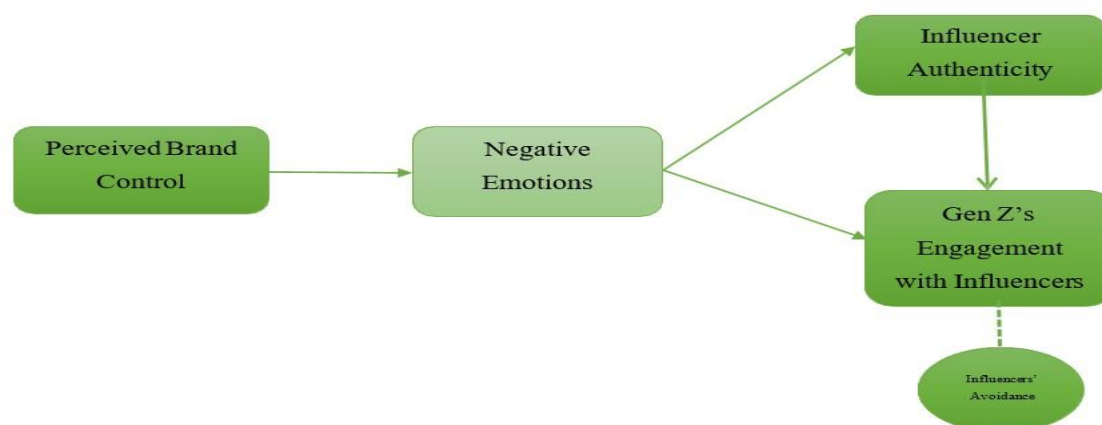
H2: Negative Emotions mediate the relationship between Perceived Brand Control and Influencer Authenticity.

To mitigate the impact of negative emotions, brands must maintain a balance between control and authenticity in influencer marketing (Duffek et al., 2025). Brands should let influencers have more say in their work, as this allows them to create content that feels real to their fans (Belanche et al., 2021). Brand credibility comes through when advertisers make sponsorships apparent without interrupting content (Cheng & Zhang, 2025). When influencers build meaningful connections with their consumers, they foster trust that extends to their audience, even when they collaborate with brand owners. Gen Z buyers have strong instincts for detecting fakeness, so these actions help them most. Brands should address negative influences to build better influencer marketing programs that meet audience needs (Parveen & Krishnaraj, 2024). Based on the above literature, it is hypothesized that:

H3: Negative Emotions mediate the relationship between Perceived Brand Control and Gen Z's Engagement with Influencers.

Existing research demonstrates the need to explore brand control dimensions in detail and to understand how negative emotions affect results. To explore the relationship between perceived brand control, influencer authenticity, and Gen Z consumer engagement, the following conceptual Framework is developed:

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Theoretical Framework

Social Influence Theory (SIT) explains that individuals are influenced by people they perceive as credible, trustworthy, or authoritative within their social environment (Flache et al., 2017).

In influencer marketing, this theory suggests that influencers shape followers' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors through their perceived authenticity and credibility. Influencers who are viewed as genuine are more likely to persuade followers to engage with their content and recommended products. However, excessive brand control may reduce an influencer's authenticity, making them appear inauthentic and less persuasive (Audrezet et al., 2020). Therefore, SIT helps explain how brand control can either strengthen or weaken influencer effectiveness among audiences, particularly Gen Z consumers.

Source Credibility Theory (SCT) highlights the importance of an influencer's credibility in affecting audience attitudes and behaviors. The theory identifies expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness as the key dimensions of credibility (Coutinho et al., 2023). In influencer marketing, followers are more likely to accept recommendations from influencers they perceive as credible and authentic. However, when influencers appear overly controlled by brands, their credibility may decline, causing followers to become skeptical of endorsements. For Gen Z consumers, maintaining influencer credibility is essential because this generation values transparency and authenticity in online interactions (Yasa et al., 2025). SCT therefore emphasizes the need to balance brand control with influencer independence to maintain trust and campaign effectiveness.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) focuses on the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as key drivers of human motivation and behaviour (de Aldecoa et al., 2022). In influencer marketing, the theory suggests that excessive brand control may reduce influencers' autonomy, leading followers to perceive them as inauthentic. Authentic influencers fulfil followers' need for relatedness by creating a sense of connection and trust. Conversely, overly controlled influencers may create feelings of manipulation, reducing trust and engagement (Gu & Duan, 2024). SDT therefore explains why maintaining influencer autonomy and authenticity is important for successful influencer marketing campaigns targeting Gen Z consumers.

Methodology

Research philosophy adopted in this study was positivism philosophy. It assumes that reality is objective and can be perceived and measured only through empirical means. This study also mirrored the goal of studying the relationship among the perceived brand control, influencer authenticity and the Gen Z consumer engagement level with quantifiable data (Park et al., 2020). This study was carried out using a deductive research approach. Thus, it was a deductive approach where hypotheses were generated from the existing theories and then checked with empirical data collection (Saunders, 2009).

The research design adopted in this study was quantitative research. Quantitative research was appropriate for utilization in this study because it allowed measuring and deducing how perceived brand control, influencer authenticity and negative emotions interact with other variables such as Gen Z consumer engagement (Huyler & McGill, 2019).

Current study used a survey strategy which was consistent with the quantitative approach, as it allowed to generate data from a population of 400 respondents (sample) and subjecting the data to statistical tests for testation of proposed hypotheses. The study used a structured survey to collect numerical data to quantify relations between variables and make generalizable conclusion on impact of perceived brand control on authenticity of influencer and Gen Z consumer engagement.

This research study's population of interest was Gen Z consumers (who were born from approximately 1997 to early 2010s) who actively use social media influencers. In this research, random sampling approach was adopted for sampling, as participants (who were readily available and able to participate in the study) were selected.

The survey questionnaire was distributed via social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, and

Facebook) as well as the online forums that are frequently used by Gen Z consumers. The survey was made voluntary and responses were collected anonymously to preserve anonymity of the respondents.

Data collection in this research was made using a survey questionnaire. Both close-ended and open-ended questions were asked in the survey, so that data collection could be quantifiable and workable for the statistical analysis (Fowler, 2013). Questionnaire used for data collected comprised of five sections including Demographic Information, Perceived Brand Control, Negative Emotions and Influencer Avoidance, Demographic Information, and Gen Z Consumer Behavior.

The actual data collection process consisted of distributing the questionnaire online and responses were collected over a period of four weeks. A total of 400 responses were gathered to have a strong enough dataset to analyze. Collected data was analyzed using statistical analysis. SPSS was used to perform statistical analysis process. Collected data from the survey questionnaire was used to analyze the study's hypotheses and test the study's hypotheses using SPSS (Disman et al., 2017). Demographic characteristics of sample were summarized through descriptive statistics and relationships between variables were investigated using the inferential statistics (regression and mediation analyses).

The study protected the rights of participants and their confidentiality. Copy of informed consent form was given to participants which described the purpose of study, their participation being voluntary, and confidentiality of responses (Arellano et al., 2023). In addition, confidentiality and security of participants' data was ensured. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all responses were collected anonymously.

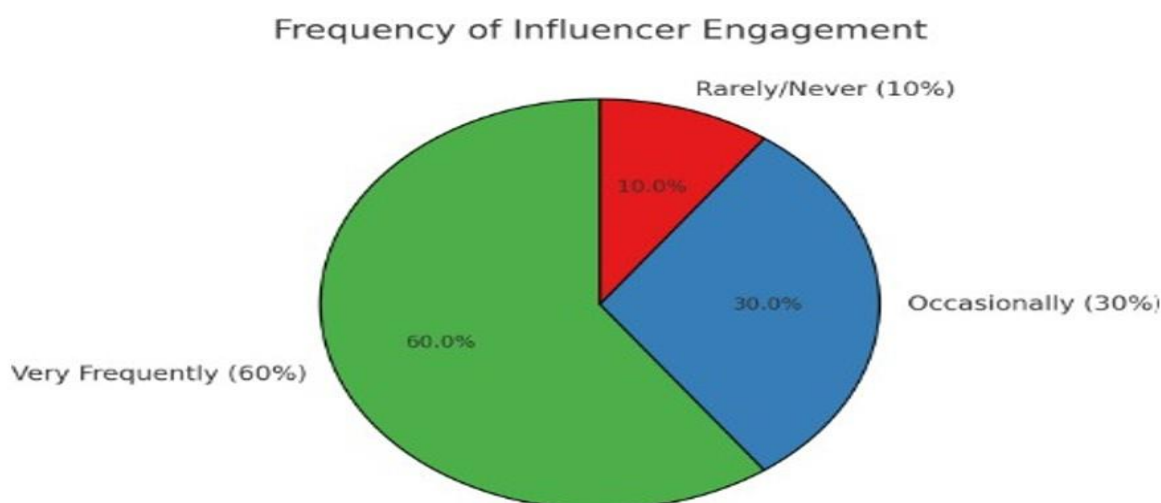
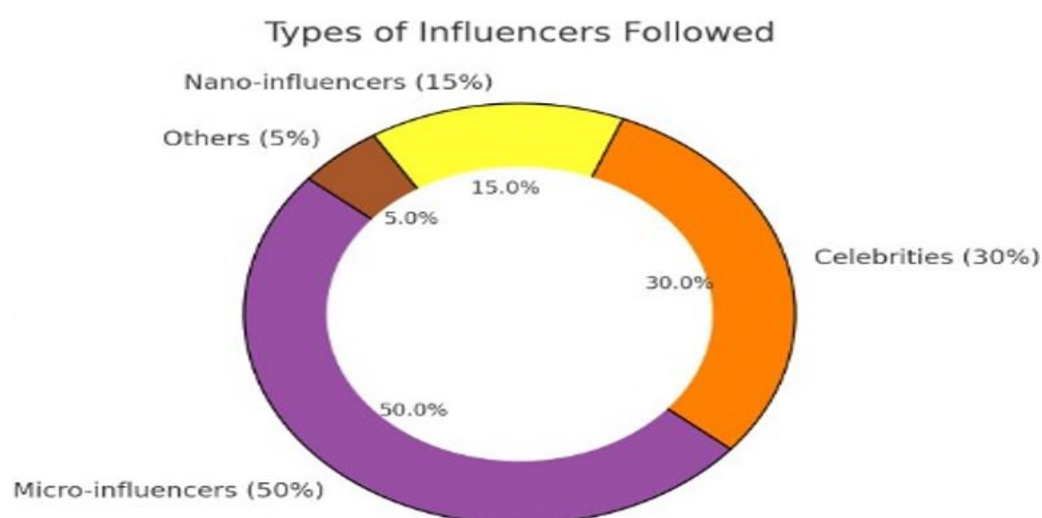
Data Analysis

Demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in table 1 below.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age Group	18-21	180	45%
	22-25	140	35%
	26-30	60	15%
	31+	20	5%
Gender	Male	160	40%
	Female	220	55%
	Non-binary	12	3%
	Prefer not to say	8	2%
Social Media Use	Multiple times a day	300	75%
	Once a day	60	15%
	A few times a week	30	7.5%
	Rarely	10	2.5%

Majority of participants were 18-21 years (45%), 22-25 years (35%), 26-30 years (15%) and 31 years and above (5%). In terms of gender, females made up the greatest group (55%), followed by males (40%), non-binary (3%) and preferred not to state (2%). Seventy-five percent of respondents stated that they used social media platforms several times a day, and 15 percent reported using them once a day. A smaller proportion (7.5%) use social media a few times a week and just 2.5% use social media rarely. Among these platforms, Instagram proved to be the most frequently used one (78 %) followed by TikTok (65%), YouTube (50 %), Twitter/X (30 %) and Facebook (25 %).

Figure 2: Frequency of Influencer Engagement**Figure 3: Types of Influencers Followed**

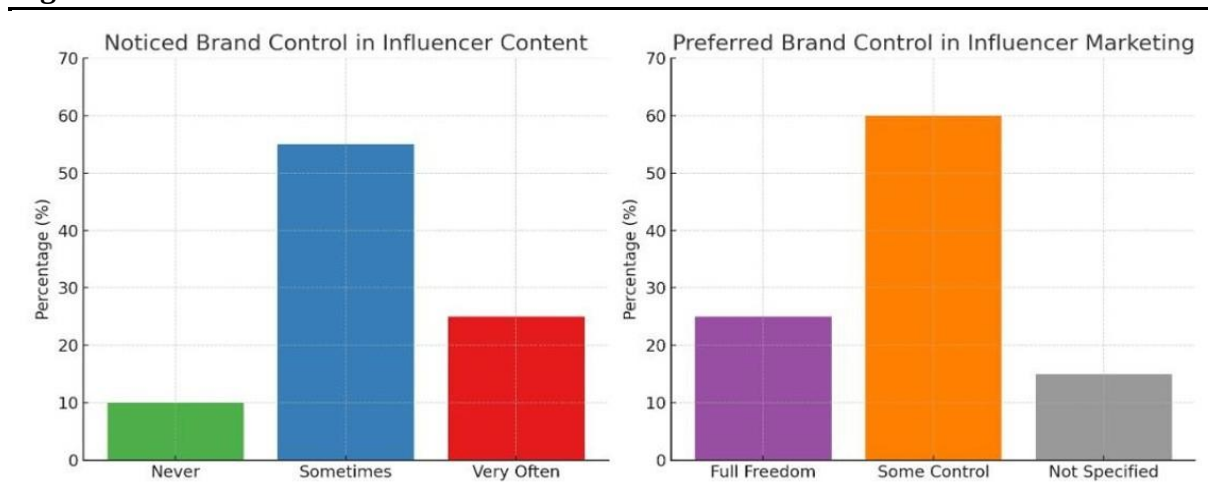
The survey showed that 60% of people polled rarely (30%) or frequently (60%) interact with them. Nearly 90% of these respondents reported that they always or often engage with influencer content and only 10% said they rarely or never do so. It reveals that influencer marketing has a large part to play in forming the online experiences of Gen Z consumers. Of all the influencers micro-influencers were the favorite (50%), the celebrities (30%) and nano-influencers (15%).

Authenticity arose as most critical factor for trust with 85% of respondents citing it as essential. Relatability was quite close at 65%, and so was transparency (75%), and expertise (55%) were also important. On top of that, open ended responses repeatedly reaffirmed the role of real storytelling and reinforcing values in the building of trust. For instance, one respondent said, “I trust people who share their real experiences and are not only there to promote something for the money.”

Most of the respondents said they thought influencers were authentic only 20% of the time, 40% felt that they were sometimes authentic, and 30% that they were rarely authentic. When responding to content that looks heavily branded, 50% say it makes them distrustful, 30% are

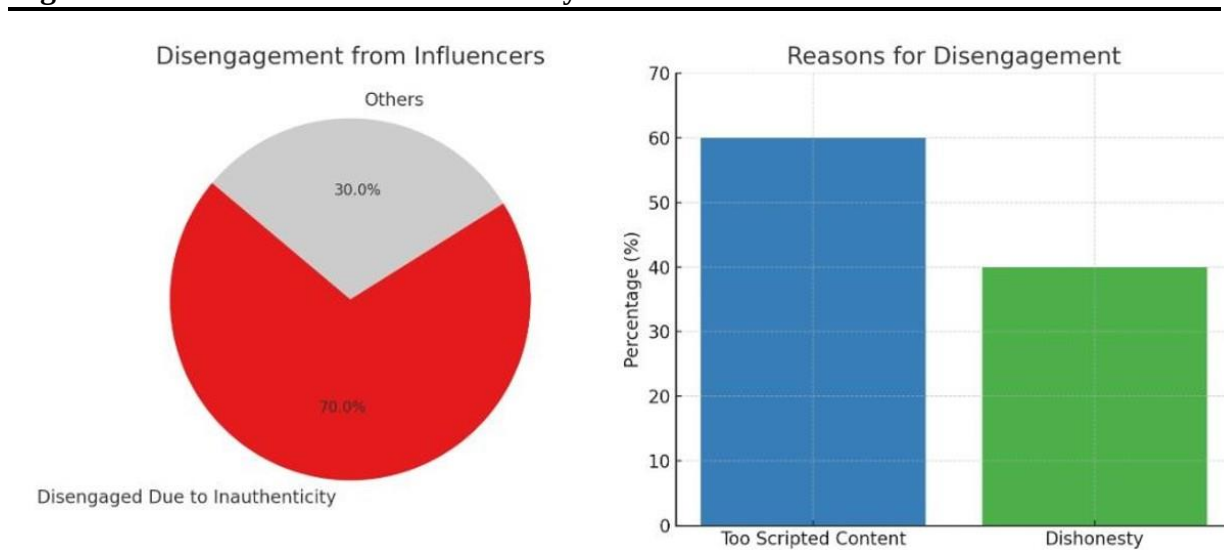
skeptical, 15% are even manipulated. The findings highlight the level of sensitivity Gen Z consumers have to perceive inauthenticity and the risk to influencer credibility.

Figure 4: Awareness Brand Control



Some 55% of participants said they saw brand control of influencer content sometimes and 25% often. However, only 10 % said that they had never noticed such control. That means Gen Z consumers are on guard for the mark of brand influence in influencer marketing. Seventy percent cited acceptable levels of brand control based on the idea that brands should not have total control of the creative, and only up to a certain point, according to 60 % and 25 % respectively believed influencers have full creative freedom. It indicates that balance is preferred — a brand provides guidelines without stifling the influencer's very authentic voice. Around 65% of respondents agreed that excessive brand control degrades the perception of the authenticity of influencers. Open ended responses also expressed issues, including loss of spontaneity and overly polished content. "In some cases, if I can see an influencer's posts look like ads, I don't trust them," remarked one participant. This corresponds to the theoretical framework of Source Credibility Theory, which posits that an excessive degree of brand control inhibits an influencer's credibility.

Figure 5: Avoidance Due to Inauthenticity



From social media influencers being called out for being too perfect to becoming an enemy of fake followers, 70% of respondents told the survey that they had stopped following or even engaging with the influencers because they did not feel they came across as real. Reasons included “too scripted content” (60%), “honesty” (40%). These results showcase the actual results of inauthenticity, since consumers disengage willingly with those who do not fulfill the expected condition of inauthenticity.

Regression analysis supports the mediating role of negative emotions on brand control to influencer avoidance relationship.

Table 2: Regression Analysis

No.	Pathway Tested	β (Standardized Coefficient)	t-Value	P-Value	R ²	Adjusted R ²
H1	Perceived Brand Control → Influencer Authenticity	-0.52	-9.76	<0.01	0.27	0.26
H2	Perceived Brand Control → Negative Emotions → Influencer Authenticity (Mediation)	0.45 → -0.41	8.12 → -7.25	<0.01	0.20 → 0.19	
H3	Perceived Brand Control → Negative Emotions → Influencer Avoidance (Mediation)	0.45 → 0.43	8.12 → 7.93	<0.01	0.20 → 0.18	

The results found that brand control was associated to negative emotions ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$) and negative emotions were associated to avoidance behavior ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, this proves Hypothesis 3 and shows that disgruntlement such as distrust and skepticism would foster the probability of consumers disinterested from influencers whom they regard as fictitious.

Figure 6: Mediating Role of Negative Emotions

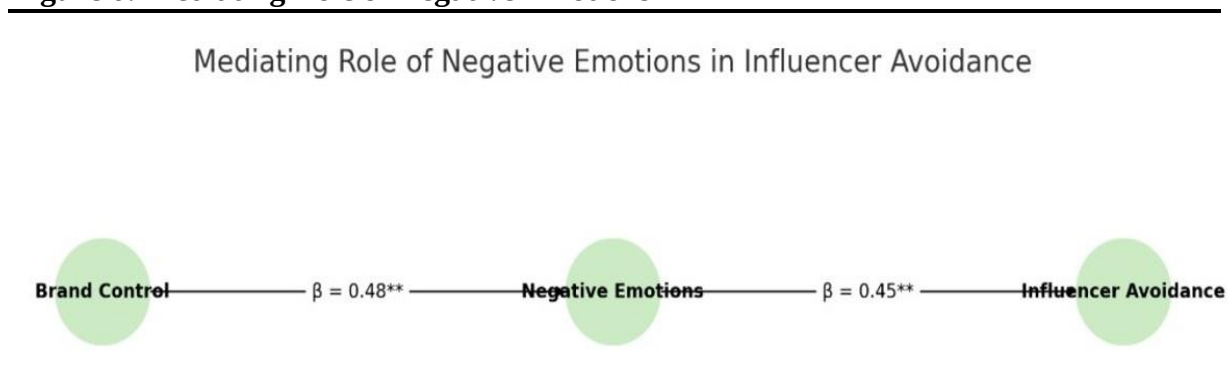
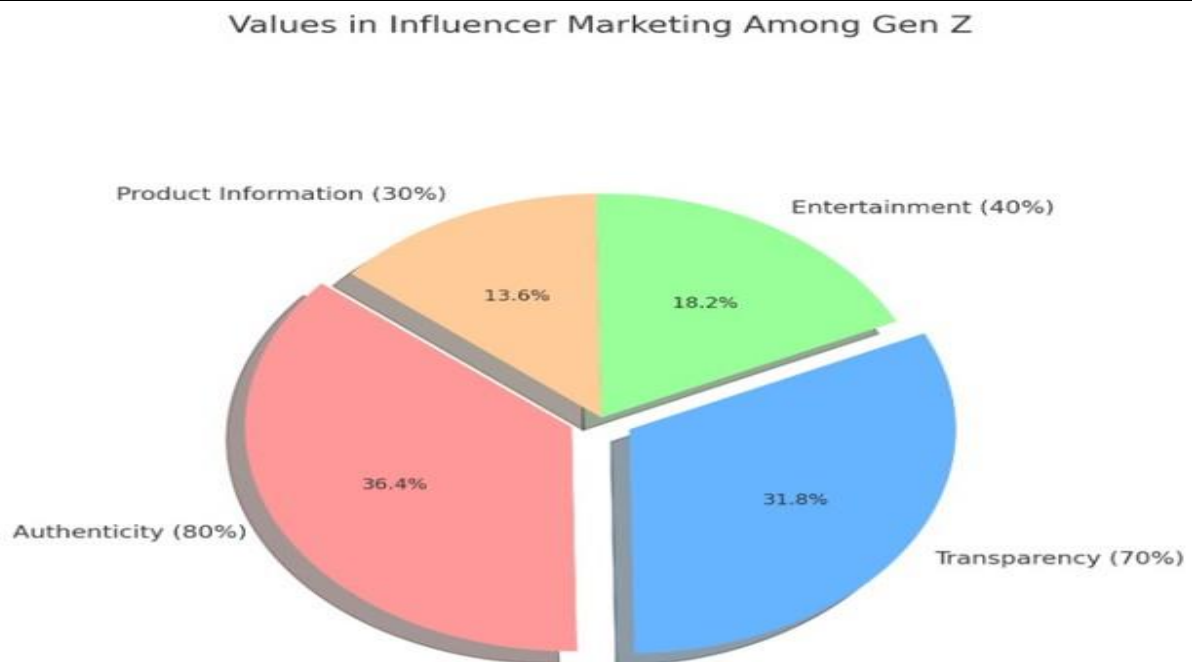


Figure 7: Values in Influence Marketing

The most valued aspects of influencer marketing were authenticity (80%) and transparency (70%) over entertainment (40%) and product information (30). That is, Gen Z values genuine connection more than anything, these findings agree.

Open ended responses revealed a strong majority (75%) who thought that the disclosure of brand partnerships was very important and use ethical responsibility as a reason. A good example of this is one respondent saying, “We should know when influencers are paid to promote something.”

Almost two-thirds of the respondents felt the truthfulness of influencers had greater importance for Gen Z compared to other generations. This has mirrored what the broader literature of Gen Z’s digital savvy and demand for transparency would have suggested.

Table 3 below sums up the results of the hypothesis tests. The data supported all three hypotheses. All three hypotheses were supported by the data:

Table 3: Mediation Analysis (Hayes PROCESS Macro Model 4)

Path	Effect (β)	SE	t	p	95% CI
PBC $\rightarrow$ NE (a-path)	0.45	0.055	8.12	< 0.01	[0.34, 0.56]
NE $\rightarrow$ IA (b-path)	-0.41	0.057	-7.25	< 0.01	[-0.53, - 0.29]
PBC $\rightarrow$ IA (c path, direct effect)	-0.31	0.052	-5.96	< 0.01	[-0.43, - 0.20]
PBC $\rightarrow$ IA (c path, total effect)	-0.52	0.053	-9.76	< 0.01	[-0.63, - 0.40]
Indirect effect (a*b)	-0.18	Boot SE $\approx$ 0.034			[-0.26, - 0.11]

There is a significant indirect effect of perceived brand control on influencer authenticity through negative emotions. The total effect (-0.52) reduces to a direct effect (- 0.31), indicating partial mediation.

Table 4: Mediation Analysis (Hayes PROCESS Macro Model 4)

Path	Effect (β)	SE	t	p	95% CI
PBC $\rightarrow$ NE (a-path)	0.45	0.055	8.12	< 0.01	[0.34, 0.56]
NE $\rightarrow$ GZE (b-path)	0.43	0.054	7.93	< 0.01	[0.32, 0.54]
PBC $\rightarrow$ GZE (c path, direct effect)	0.29	0.053	5.47	< 0.01	[0.18, 0.40]
PBC $\rightarrow$ GZE (c path, total effect)	0.48	0.055	8.65	< 0.01	[0.38, 0.59]
Indirect effect (a*b)	0.19	Boot SE $\approx$ 0.036			[0.12, 0.27]

There is also a significant indirect effect of perceived brand control on Gen Z avoidance behavior via negative emotions. Again, this shows partial mediation.

Discussion

The results supported Hypothesis 1 (H1) that there was a strong negative correlation between perceived brand control and influencer authenticity ($\beta = -0.52$; $p < 0.01$). This conclusion is consistent with Source Credibility Theory (SCT) which suggests that the over control a brand exercises over an influencer loses the credibility of the content created by the influencer as it seems too scripted or too commercialized (Umeogu, 2012). Gen Z is sensitive to authenticity, and its open-ended responses, which range from ‘When an influencer’s posts look like ads, I stop trusting them’ to things like ‘It’s really consumptive of people to put their own interests first before the greater interest of all,’ demonstrate this sensitivity particularly. These findings are in line with prior work by Zniva et al. (2023) where audiences perceive influencers as less authentic when brands dictate messaging or creative execution.

Table 5: Alignment of Findings with Theoretical Frameworks

Finding	Theoretical Support	Literature Correlation
High brand control $\rightarrow$ Lower authenticity	Source Credibility Theory	Zniva et al. (2023): Authenticity diminishes with excessive control
Negative emotions mediate avoidance	Self-Determination Theory (SDT)	Yang & Battocchio (2021): Distrust triggers disengagement
Preference for micro-influencers	Social Influence Theory (SIT)	Nadanyiova & Sujanska (2023): Relatability drives trust

Hypothesis 2 (H2) and Hypothesis 3 (H3) were supported, as negative emotions (distrust and skepticism) mediated the relationship between brand control and influencer avoidance ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$). This reflects the finding in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) that perceived manipulation erodes autonomy and relatedness, the two psychological needs that are most important to this generation as per de Aldecoa et al (2022). For instance, 70% of respondents stated that they became disengaged from influencers because of ‘too scripted content,’ revealing how negative emotions directly lead to behavioral consequences. These findings support Yang and Battocchio's (2021) finding that distrust is, in fact, a psychological barrier to engagement.

Gen Z's prioritization of authenticity (80%) and transparency (75%) over entertainment (40%) underscores their demand for genuine connections. Social Influence Theory's emphasis on

peer-like trust (Flache et al., 2017) was supported by our preference for micro-influencers (50%) because they were relatable. From the standpoint of finding authenticity, 85% of respondents felt that, compared to other generations, Gen Z is more responsive to authenticity, as noted by Matsa Prasanna (2024).

Implications

Unlike past research that treats brand control as unidimensional (Feng et al., 2023), this research recognized the intricacies in just how brand control affects content, messaging, and disclosure. It validates the negative emotions as critical mediating entities that bridge the gap between brand control and the behavioral outcomes (Hudders et al., 2022). Moreover, it is Generational Specificity, as it acknowledges Gen Z's singular consumer behavior and digital savviness, which align with the demand for transparency (Slepian et al., 2024).

This study has powerful, real-world practical implications for brands, influencers, and, particularly, policymakers, as all parties play a key role in shaping the influencer marketing landscape. The study offers insights that brands should use to provide loose frameworks so influencers can put their own twist and style into the content. Similarly, the study suggests that while influencers promote branded products, they should still create content that reflects their opinions and experiences, as this is what makes them influential. Finally, the study's findings underscore the importance of clearer parameters to govern influencer-brand partnerships, especially regarding how influencers and brands disclose sponsorship and content transparency.

Conclusion

The study investigated the important role of perceived brand control, influencer authenticity, and Gen Z consumer engagement and has shed light on the important theoretical and practical implications for marketing theory and practice. The study's findings show that excessive brand control erodes perceived influencer authenticity, with 65% of respondents associating inauthentic content with the other end of the scale. Moreover, negative emotions mediate the relationship, as observed among 70% of respondents who reported disengaging from influencers they perceived as inauthentic. The results complement existing theoretical frameworks, especially Source Credibility Theory and Self-Determination Theory, in demonstrating the psychological mechanisms that lead Gen Z to engage.

The research reinforces that Gen Z is a digital native whose thought-leadership values include authenticity and transparency over traditional marketing boosts. This generation has come to see beyond these boundary lines and is now accurately discriminating against the overly commercialized ones, as many (50%) expressed a strong preference for micro-influencers, and 85% of respondents value authenticity. This is important for marketing practitioners to note because brands must find a way to strike a balance to successfully market to this demographic while preserving influencer autonomy and maintaining message consistency.

Conclusively, this study advances academic understanding and real-world marketing strategy by demonstrating that, for Gen Z, authenticity and transparency are critical for forging sincere relationships with other humans, driven by their intrinsic values.

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