

The Dark Side of Influencer Marketing: How Commercialization Triggers Moral Emotions and Avoidance Behavior

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Abstract

Avoiding influencer is now becoming a new trend that has attracted a lot of attention. Due to usual influencer marketing activity explicitly advising their customer to buy certain products they advertised. This study provides the avoiding influencer advertisement how gen-z consumers see them as credibility and advertisement source. This study conducted a survey collected data from 240 Gen Z individuals who are actively using social media as main channels. We examined survey through Likert-scaled online questionnaires, used simple random sampling method. All data were analyzed using Smart-PLS 4. The findings aimed to indicate what variables and factors influencing on social media influencer avoiding behavior on Gen-Z consumers. Additionally, this study proposes measurement of credibility of social media influencer purchase intention as well. Moreover, this study focused on how Gen Z consumers evaluate social media influencer's credibility such as personality, sponsorship, and ethics.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, Perceived commercialization, Moral emotions, Influencer avoidance, Generation Z

I. Introduction

The social media landscape has emerged a significant evolution has occurred that led to traditional media strategy evolved thus social media influencers become dominant in advertising industry. On the other-hand bombardment of promotional content that is often viewed as lack of transparency and credibility. Especially, almost every influencer promotes some of the products that may often see as must avoidable products or inappropriate for consumer's own good. Despite influencers who persuaded buy the products or reviewed, avoiding influencers emphasize consumers should not buy that product. This behavior prevents consumers buying excessive number of products, poor performance products or that item failed to meet consumer's expectation. Social influencer avoidant behavior designed to reject false advertisement, pseudo-scientific studies or any other related promotion.

Trustworthy influencers more likely promote products with authenticity, positive traits, on the other hand avoiding-influencing means take another path giving the honest evaluation, criticism. Moreover, this approach shows that getting a lot of attention on major social media platforms. Recent example, people using hashtag named #deinfluencing got over 200 million views on TikTok platform. Avoiding influencers behavior exposes flaws, misleading technique and reveals their hidden motives behind those sponsored content. Then it is challenging the influencer's trustworthiness, credibility. As influencers side they focus on brand promotion rather than trustworthiness, source of trust and credibility. Then consumer response is focused on showing their real image and break down their polished publicity they often shown. This approach getting attention and rose during the misleading marketing practices and unethical marketing messages.

Gen-Z, born between 1995-2012, this generation has advantages of high usage of technology and literacy those led them to do online shopping consuming social media contents. Nowadays, internet penetration rate has grown and reached to peak Gen-Z remains main active and contributing group in internet users. Gen-Z reveals a strong desire and dependent on social media for exploring a new-products, conduct research about products, reading reviews or following recommendations of influencers on YouTube, TikTok etc. They solely spend three hours for per day only surfing in the social media. Recent study suggests that usage ranges from three to four hours, with some new reports shows this could be ranged to one to eight hours. This becomes lifestyle of Gen-Z it is tied to their lifestyle, work, spending significant time in social media means they heavily using social media as shopping. Meanwhile, influencer marketing has become phenomenon and the marketing landscape, companies using social media as predictable tool for understanding consumer behavior, decision-making, thus social media playing crucial role for consumer decision-making. Nonetheless, social media influencer avoidant behavior attracting a lot of Gen-Z consumers those challenges will remain same in near future they up against the excessive consumption and false marketing practices. Previous studies have not fully reveal how avoiding social media influencers affecting Gen-Z's decision making and intentions. The close evidence found comes from recent study showing avoiding influencers behavior significantly effect on attitudes and intentions. In contrast, that aspect primarily viewed from millennial's aspect and perspectives, gender differences, consumer attitudes toward influencer content. While prior research has established that an influencer's professional expertise and content quality are pivotal in building consumer trust (Gantulga & Mashlai, 2025), the present study further examines how excessive marketing commercialization

erodes this trust and triggers negative moral emotions. Therefore, this study focused on revealing the effect of social media influencer avoidant behavior on Gen-Z's purchase decision making. No prior research found examined the social media influencer avoidant behavior affected and related purchase intention. This study draws on the framework of influencer credibility especially attractiveness and trustworthiness which has been shown to positively associated with a loss of purchase interest. Based on current previous research, assumption of source credibility is positively associated with a decrease in purchase intention.

II. Literature Review

2.1 Influencer avoidance

In the contemporary digital landscape, social media has evolved into a fundamental engine for the engagement and strategic growth of digital creators. Beyond simple content distribution, many influencers are now perceived and managed as "human brands," possessing the same market weight and psychological resonance as traditional corporate entities. This shift is particularly significant when analyzing the consumption patterns of Gen-Z, a demographic that prioritizes radical authenticity, transparency, and ethical integrity in marketing interactions (Fent et al., 2021; Munsch, 2021). For these consumers, the value of a brand or influencer is no longer solely derived from aesthetic appeal or product utility, but from a demonstrated alignment with social and moral values.

Consequently, the relationship between Gen-Z and influencers is contingent upon maintained trust. This generation is uniquely proactive in holding creators accountable; they are highly likely to disengage from or "unfollow" influencers and brands that participate in unethical behavior or exhibit morally inappropriate conduct (Childers & Boatwright, 2021). This behavioral trend underscores the necessity of a "Moral Responsibility Framework" within influencer marketing. It suggests that for a partnership to be sustainable, ethical standards must be prioritized over short-term financial gains. Ultimately, the influencer's role has transcended mere promotion, requiring them to act as ethical gatekeepers whose commercial activities must reflect the moral expectations of their audience to ensure long-term brand equity.

2.2 Theory of moral responsibility

Moral responsibility explains what it means to be a moral criterion and any marketing actions are judged by as morally acceptable or no acceptable (Eshleman, 2014). According to this theory, consumers are considering moral agents when social environment holds them accountable for actions, they perform based on voluntary and understanding of their consequences (Fischer, 1986). Expresses of society such as praise or blame based on the consumer's role in social relationships (Eshleman, 2014). On this perspective influencers or brands can be seen as moral agents they expected to do ethical marketing activities. However, it is reasonable to expect individuals will hold other human beings as human actors and brands as humanlike entities accountable for their behavior. Gen-Z more likely to react negatively to any irresponsible influencers (Xie et al., 2019) then believe brands should be accountable for their behavior of their stakeholders, including all partner such as suppliers and agents (Amaeshi et al., 2008). When companies misbehave and irresponsibly, it usually leads to negative attitudes toward the brand (Xie & Bagozzi, 2019). Furthermore, Gen-Z holds strong importance on ethical concerns, consumption, they are tending to hold brands accountable for failing to meet moral standards (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Goldring & Azab, 2021).

Influencer and brands both sides are expected to maintain ethical standards related to in their interactions with followers and consumers. These ethical principles are perceived to be violated; consumers develop negative moral emotions toward them. Thus, consumers may try to comfort themselves by engaging in coping mechanism such as avoiding influencers or brands, engaging with negative word of mouth or seeking revenge (Kavaliauskė & Simonavičiūtė, 2015). Gen-Z see it as wrong when brands or companies pay for influencers and control what they say or promoting. They thinking the brand and influencer are should be responsible because this is can be problem for consumer choice and honesty (Sanjaamanal & Gantulga, 2025). Consumer should use clear and truthful information about products, when it does not happen, they see themselves as not trustworthy. Furthermore, Gen-Z can feel negative emotions and unethical marketing approach and they avoid brand or influencer then choose not to believe it or buying it. They may also view this behavior as violation of values of brands and influencers.

2.3 Perceived commercialization

Social media contentiously develop, the connection between consumer and influencers it is described as parasocial relationships has become vital. Influencers build one-sided message sharing personal experiences, communicating, interacting with followers then promoting products in some way. Nonetheless, they often seen as more approachable than mainstream traditional celebrities. This perceived authenticity plays a key role in deciding main attitude and purchase decision of their followers. Conversely, the influence of commercialized influencer's content adds complexity to this relationship. Many companies and brands prefer influencer who maintain a proper mix of sponsored content and non-sponsored content. Excessive promotion can weaken trust and damage relationship. Researcher also noted that a constant amount of promotional content reduces an influencer's trustworthiness making them less genuine and worthless. As a result, when consumers view them as over commercialized, they develop resistance in both sides especially cognitively and emotionally this leading to influencer avoidant behavior.

2.4 Gender

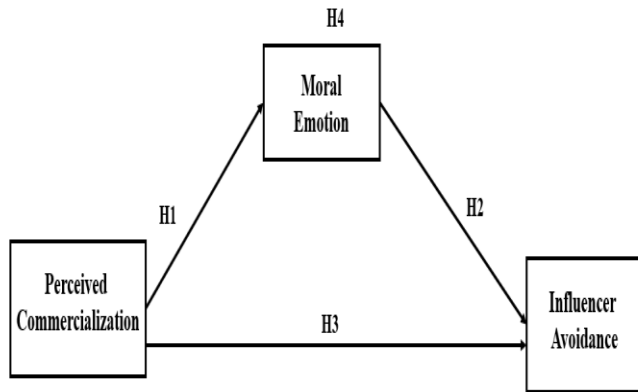
In marketing practice, consumer ethics, and moral emotion not directly determine perception of perceived commercialization but it can moderate how commercialization is interpreted and emotionally evaluated. Research shows that women tend to evaluate business practices as less moral and ethical when marketing activities or commercialization conflicts with moral and ethical values. Some study demonstrate moral emotion can affect consumer reactions to corporate actions, when they believe ethical standards are violated. Xie, Bagozzi & Grønhaug (2015). Perceived responsibility can trigger negative moral emotions such as anger, contemplation, shaping behavior like boycotting that brand. Xie, Bagozzi & Grønhaug (2019). Thus, women can react strong empathy-based emotions such as guilt, compassion, outrage on the other hand men can react more detached or justice-based response.

Based on the theoretical foundations and findings of previous studies, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1 : Perceived commercialization positively influences moral emotions.
- H2 : Moral emotions positively influence influencer avoidance.
- H3 : Perceived commercialization positively influences influencer avoidance.

H4 : Moral emotions mediate the relationship between perceived commercialization and influencer avoidance.

Figure 1. Research model



III. Methodology

3.1 Research design and Data collection

This study adopted a quantitative research design to examine the relationships between Moral Emotion, Perceived Commercialization, and Influencer Avoidance. Primary data was collected through an online survey distributed to students across all academic levels (1st to 4th year) at the National University of Mongolia, Business School. The online format was chosen for its efficiency in reaching a diverse student population and ensuring data accuracy.

3.2 Sampling

A convenience sampling method was employed to recruit participants from the Business School, NUM. This demographic was selected as university students represent a primary consumer group for social media content and are highly susceptible to influencer marketing and commercialization trends. By including students from freshman to senior years, the study captures a broad spectrum of perspectives within the academic environment.

3.3 Measurement

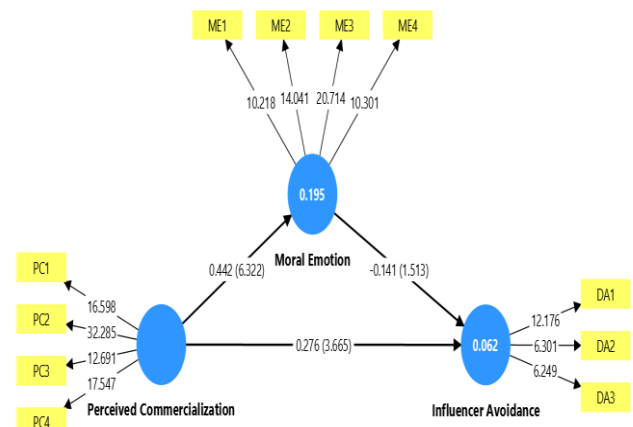
The survey instrument was developed using established scales adapted from previous literature. All measurement items were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (5). This scale was utilized to capture the intensity of respondents' perceptions and attitudes regarding their emotional responses to influencers and their avoidance behaviors.

3.4 Data analysis procedure

The data analysis process was executed in two distinct phases to ensure the rigor and validity of the findings. In the initial phase, IBM SPSS Statistics was utilized for data cleaning and preliminary screening. This involved a meticulous review of the raw dataset to identify and address missing values, outliers, and any inconsistent response patterns among the MUIS-BS student participants. Descriptive statistics were also computed in SPSS to summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample, while skewness and

kurtosis were examined to evaluate the distributional properties of the data. The second phase of the analysis employed Smart-PLS 4 to perform Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). This method was selected for its robustness in handling complex models and its effectiveness in estimating parameters without the strict assumption of multivariate normality. Following the standard in PLS-SEM reporting, the model was evaluated in two stages: the measurement model (outer model) and the structural model (inner model). The measurement model was first assessed to confirm the reliability and validity of the latent constructs, including Moral Emotion (ME), Perceived Commercialization (PC), and Influencer Avoidance (DA). Internal consistency was verified through Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (rho_a and rho_c), ensuring all values exceeded the established threshold of 0.70. Furthermore, convergent validity was established as the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct surpassed 0.50. After confirming that the measurement model was psychometrically sound, the structural model was evaluated. To test the proposed hypotheses and determine the statistical significance of the path coefficients, a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples was performed. This allowed for a precise estimation of t-values and p-values, providing a rigorous basis for accepting or rejecting the research hypotheses.

Figure 2. Smart PLS-4 t-test results



3.5 Measurement Model

The measurement model was evaluated based on internal consistency, reliability, and convergent validity. The criteria used included Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability (both rho_a and rho_c), and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The analysis shows that the Cronbach's alpha values for Influencer Avoidance (DA), Moral Emotion (ME), and Perceived Commercialization (PC) range from 0.707 to 0.780. These results exceed the threshold of 0.7 recommended by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), indicating that the measurement scales are reliable. Furthermore, the Composite Reliability (rho_a and rho_c) values for all constructs are well above the 0.7 threshold (ranging from 0.710 to 0.857), confirming that the internal consistency of the constructs is satisfactory.

Convergent validity was evaluated using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) criterion. Following the recommendation by Fornell and Larcker (1981), an AVE value of 0.50 or higher is required to demonstrate that a construct explains a sufficient portion of the variance of its indicators. The results are as follows: Influencer Avoidance: 0.632 Moral Emotion: 0.534 Perceived

Commercialization: 0.601. All constructs surpassed the 0.50 threshold, indicating that the measurement model possesses adequate convergent validity.

The evaluation of the measurement model confirms that all constructs exhibit satisfactory reliability and validity. Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability indices for Moral Emotion,

Perceived Commercialization, and Influencer Avoidance were all above the recommended threshold of 0.70. Furthermore, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for all constructs exceeded the 0.50 benchmark, indicating adequate convergent validity for the measurement scales utilized in this study.

Table 1. Overview of construct reliability and validity

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Avoidance	0.730	0.850	0.837	0.632
Moral emotion	0.707	0.710	0.820	0.534
Commercialization	0.780	0.788	0.857	0.601

3.6 Hypotheses Results

The structural model was evaluated to test the proposed hypotheses by examining the path coefficients, T-statistics, and p-values. The results of the bootstrapping procedure are summarized as follows: In the case of hypothesis 1, Perceived Commercialization -> Moral Emotion (Beta = 0.442, p < 0.001). Hypothesis 2, the relationship between Perceived Commercialization and Moral Emotion is positive and statistically highly significant (T = 6.322, p = 0.000). This indicates that as the consumers' perception of commercialization increases, their moral emotional response also strengthens significantly. Perceived Commercialization -> Influencer Avoidance (Beta = 0.213, p < 0.05). However, hypothesis 3, the direct effect of Perceived Commercialization on Influencer Avoidance is positive and significant (T = 3.271, p = 0.001). This suggests that higher levels of perceived commercialization directly

lead to increased avoidance behavior toward influencers among the respondents. Result shows: Moral Emotion -> Influencer Avoidance (Beta = -0.141, p > 0.05). The direct path from Moral Emotion to Influencer Avoidance was found to be statistically non-significant (T = 1.513, p = 0.130). Since the p-value exceeds the standard 0.05 threshold, this specific hypothesis is not supported, suggesting that moral emotion alone does not directly trigger avoidance in this sample. Finally, in the case of hypothesis 4, Indirect Effect: Commercialization -> Moral -> Avoidance (Beta = 0.235, p < 0.05)

The indirect effect analysis reveals a significant mediation path (T = 2.356, p = 0.001). Even though the direct link from Moral to Avoidance was weak, the total indirect path driven by Commercialization through Moral Emotion significantly impacts Influencer Avoidance behaviors of the consumers.

Table 2. Path coefficient

Hypothesis	Path	β	T-Statistics	P-Value	Result
H1	Commercialization → Moral	0.442	6.322	0.000	Supported
H2	Commercialization →Avoidance	0.213	3.271	0.001	Supported
H3	Moral →Avoidance	-0.141	1.513	0.130	Not Supported
H4	Commercialization →Moral →Avoid	0.235	2.356	0.001	Supported

IV. Discussion

The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of why consumers choose to distance themselves from social media influencers in an increasingly saturated digital market. First, the strong support for H1 confirms that when consumers perceive an influencer's content as overly commercialized, it triggers a significant moral emotional response. This result aligns with the findings of Pradhan et al. (2022), who demonstrated that Gen Z consumers are highly sensitive to perceived brand control and profit-driven motives, viewing them as a violation of marketing ethics.

Second, the relationship between perceived commercialization and influencer avoidance (H3) was found to be direct and significant. This reinforces the idea that excessive "ad-bombardment" acts as a cognitive trigger for avoidance. This is consistent with the research by Wiedmann and von Mettenheim (2020), which suggests that a high degree of commercial intent

diminishes an influencer's trustworthiness, leading to psychological resistance and eventual disengagement.

The most intriguing finding lies in the rejection of H2 (Moral Emotion -> Avoidance) as a direct path, contrasted with the significant results of H4 (Mediation). While moral emotions alone do not directly force a consumer to avoid an influencer, they act as a vital psychological bridge. This suggests that a consumer might feel a moral "twinge" about an influencer's unethical promotion but may not take the action to avoid them unless that emotion is explicitly linked back to the influencer's commercial greed. As noted by Pradhan et al. (2022), negative moral emotions serve as the internal mechanism that validates a consumer's decision to disengage. For these consumers, authenticity is a spectrum; they may forgive minor moral lapses, but they will not tolerate commercial exploitation masked as genuine advice.

V. Conclusion

This research investigated the impact of perceived commercialization on influencer avoidance through the lens of moral emotion among Gen Z consumers. The study concludes that commercialization is a double-edged sword in the influencer marketing industry. While it is necessary for the influencer's business model, exceeding the "authenticity limit" triggers a chain reaction of negative moral emotions and subsequent avoidance behavior. This conclusion supports the broader academic consensus that authenticity and ethical transparency are the primary drivers of long-term influencer credibility (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020).

The results provide critical insights for both brands and digital creators. For influencers, the "de-influencing" trend is not merely a fad but a consumer-led movement toward accountability. To maintain sustainability, influencers must balance sponsored content with high-value, non-commercial interactions to avoid triggering the "commercialization-avoidance" cycle identified in this model. In summary, this study contributes to marketing literature by highlighting that the avoidance of influencers is not just a passive habit but a morally driven consumer response. As Gen Z continues to dominate the digital economy, their demand for ethical marketing will force a paradigm shift in how influencer-brand partnerships are managed. Future strategies must prioritize "moral equity" alongside "brand equity" to survive in an era of heightened consumer awareness and transparency (Pradhan et al., 2022).

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