



# Influencer marketing: When and why gen Z consumers avoid influencers and endorsed brands

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## Abstract

Consumer avoidance of brands and influencers is a widespread phenomenon, especially among Generation Z (Gen Z); however, influencer marketing literature lacks clarity about when and why Gen Z engages in such avoidance. Our experimental investigation, across four studies, reveals that Gen Z considers brands' control over influencers to be morally irresponsible and, thus, avoids both. We introduce a novel construct, *influencer avoidance*, and examine its drivers. Study 1 indicates that perceived brand control engenders avoidance; moderation evidence shows that macro (vs. micro) influencers accentuate (attenuate) the influence of brand control on avoidance. Study 2 shows that Gen Z enjoying a strong versus weak relationship with influencers results in lower (higher) avoidance towards influencers and endorsed brands. Study 3 demonstrates that negative moral emotions mediate the relationship between perceived brand control and avoidance behavior. Study 4 generalizes the findings by analyzing a different influencer and endorsed brand and including a prominent advertisement disclosure. By investigating the drivers and mechanisms of Gen Z's avoidance behavior, our research contributes to research on the theory of moral responsibility, Gen Z's influencer avoidance behavior, and anti-consumption literature. This offers key insights into how to prevent acts of consumer retribution towards influencers and brands.

## KEYWORDS

anti-consumption, brand avoidance, brand endorsement, influencer avoidance, influencer marketing, influencers, macro influencer, micro influencer

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

An *influencer* is someone who attracts many followers on social media and becomes a source of advice for them (Leung et al., 2022a; Vrontis et al., 2021). Among Generation Z (Gen Z), 70% follow at least one influencer on platforms such as YouTube and Instagram (Kantar, 2020).

Gen Z considers influencers to be peers and treats them as more trustworthy and reliable than celebrities (Martinez-Lopez et al., 2020). In addition, Kantar (2020) found that 44% of Gen Z makes purchase decisions based on influencer recommendations. Brands are also aware of the power of these influencers over the consumption patterns of Gen Z and, thus, increasingly seek to harness the power of

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influencer recommendations. According to a blog post by Influencer Intelligence in 2021 (Barnett, 2021), 45% of marketers feel they should exert complete control over the captions and esthetics of influencer posts; similarly, 39% of marketers in the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK), and 55% of German marketers, seek complete control over influencers' content, across media.

Gen Z is aware of influencer marketing strategies adopted by brands; however, they expect the brands and influencers to behave responsibly while sharing information (Leung et al., 2022b). Furthermore, followers have avoided or unfollowed influencers because of disingenuous endorsements, the promotion of unrealistic or unsustainable lifestyles, and misrepresentation (Venn, 2021). Volvo's partnership with Chriselle Lim, a known influencer in the field of beauty, fashion, and lifestyle is one such example of influencer marketing going wrong. Lim partnered with Volvo to create a professional video highlighting that the brand is environmentally responsible and safety conscious, which was significantly different from her usual content. This post garnered negative reactions from her followers, of which Gen Z constituted a majority, who questioned the legitimacy of the content and credibility of both the influencer and the brand (Sid, 2022). Despite such instances, brands continue to invest a major portion of their marketing budget into influencer marketing, in a bid to target Gen Z (Martinez-Lopez et al., 2020) and influencer marketing spending by brands was estimated to reach US\$13.8 billion in 2021 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2021). Thus, it becomes pertinent to understand the situations in which Gen Z avoid influencers and their recommendations—and even the brands that employ them.

Members of Gen Z expect influencers to provide genuine information rather than to succumb to the controlling power of brands (Lou & Kim, 2019). They also expect brands to be truthful and not to engage in any acts of moral transgression (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). However, if Gen Zers perceive influencers to be deliberately advertising products and unabashedly pushing brands, they feel skeptical, annoyed, spammed, and tricked (Childers & Boatwright, 2021). They also feel aggrieved when their trust is violated, more so because they value their relationships with influencers and brands (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Often, these disgruntled consumers then launch into bitter diatribes against the brands via social media (Goldring & Azab, 2021). Therefore, it is critically important for brands to understand how and when Gen Zers express their disapproval.

Therefore, this study examines how perceived brand control affects both brand avoidance and influencer avoidance. Furthermore, we investigate the underlying psychological mechanisms and boundary conditions of the relationship between brand control and avoidance behavior. Drawing on the theory of moral responsibility, we examine the role of negative moral emotions as a mediator between brand control and avoidance of both brands and influencers. We conceptualize *brand control* as a morally irresponsible behavior that leads to negative moral emotions such as anger which, in turn, translates into adverse behavior towards both influencer and brand. In addition, influencer type (i.e., micro vs. macro) and the strength of the consumer's relationship with the influencer are known to affect influencer marketing outcomes (Jin & Phua, 2014; Leung et al.,

2022a). In this context, we evaluate the moderating roles of influencer type and relationship strength in the relationship between brand control and avoidance behavior.

This study makes several key contributions to the literature. First, in a novel endeavor, we introduce the concept of *influencer avoidance*, which has rarely been examined in marketing literature. With the increasing adoption of influencer marketing, in recent times, there has also been a growing number of instances of subversion of brands as well as the rejection of influencers who endorse these brands (Johnson et al., 2022). Kelly et al. (2010) and Youn and Kim (2019), previously studied the avoidance behavior of young millennials and teenagers who encountered covert advertising (e.g., newsfeed and native advertising) on social networking sites. They asserted that a distrust of the advertising source (i.e., brands and websites, among others) triggers avoidance behavior in teenagers and millennials. In contrast, we are examining the avoidance behavior of Gen Zers when exposed to products endorsed by influencers whom they have consciously chosen to trust and follow, on social media. Thus, we add to the literature related both to avoidance behavior and influencer marketing research. Specifically, we define *influencer avoidance* and investigate the drivers of Gen Z avoidance behavior in relation to their influencers.

Second, we enhance the generalizability of our findings by employing a four-study framework. Study 1 shows that perceived brand control influences brand and influencer avoidance; this is further validated by Studies 2, 3, and 4. Specifically, Study 4 examines the impact of brand control on avoidance behavior using a different category, a different (fictitious) influencer, and respondents from a different data-collection platform (i.e., Prolific). This study extends the findings of Lou and Kim (2019) on the perception of brand control and the research of Childers and Boatwright (2021) on consumer annoyance after perceiving brand control.

Third, this study demonstrates that relationship strength (strong vs. weak) between Gen Z and influencers attenuates (vs. accentuates) the effect of brand control on influencer avoidance. This contrasts with the findings of previous studies (Aggarwal, 2004; Ward & Ostrom, 2006), which state that retribution is more severe when influencers enjoy a strong (vs. weak) relationship with their followers. The current research also demonstrates that macro (vs. micro) influencers strengthen (vs. weaken) the influence of brand control on avoidance behavior. Last, the present paper is one of the few to demonstrate a novel pathway between brand control and influencer avoidance; specifically, our findings show the psychological mechanism (i.e., negative moral emotions) underlying the influence of brand control on avoidance behavior.

## 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 | Influencer avoidance

Social media have been responsible for the creation and rise of influencers, so much so that influencers have become brands in

themselves (Jun & Yi, 2020). Furthermore, traditional brands have been using influencers extensively to forge and foster positive relationships with Gen Z and to create a desired brand image (Chapple & Cownie, 2017; Harrison, 2018). Table 1 showcases that influencer recommendations have a greater impact on the purchase/consumption behavior of Gen Z (Scholz, 2021) as compared to traditional advertisements (Dunkley, 2017) and that Gen Zers expect influencers to provide them with accurate information on a subject of their interest (Gutfreund, 2016).

Distinguishing features of influencer brands include originality, ordinariness, and interactivity (Jun & Yi, 2020; Ki & Kim, 2019; Leung et al., 2022a). Thus, consumers expect influencers' communication to be noncommercial and real in nature, as well as consider their endorsements akin to recommendations from fellow consumers (Leung et al., 2022b).

Lee et al. (2009) state four reasons for brand avoidance, or the "phenomenon by which consumers actively choose to keep away from or reject a brand" (Lee et al., 2009; p. 2): (1) undelivered brand promises (experiential avoidance), (2) symbolically unappealing promises (identity avoidance), (3) socially detrimental promises (moral avoidance), and (4) functionally inadequate promises (deficit value avoidance).

Gen Z considers influencers to be their peers, who give their honest opinions (Reinikainen et al., 2021) rather than acting as the voices of commercialization; thus, influencers are seen as the antithesis of hegemonic brands, which Gen Z views as opportunistic (Fournier & Avery, 2011). However, when Gen Z perceives influencers as being controlled by brands, they consider them to be acts of moral transgression by influencers (Cocker et al., 2021). Stated differently, when Gen Z perceives influencers to have succumbed to the control of brands and to have acted at their behest, they treat information presented by the influencers to be commercial in nature and, accordingly, dishonest. Consequently, they are likely to hold the influencers responsible for violating the relationship, which can trigger negative feelings toward the influencers (Cocker et al., 2021). That is, Gen Z labels such transgressive acts of influencers as morally irresponsible and blameworthy (Cocker et al., 2021; Jun & Yi, 2020). This, in turn, triggers moral avoidance behavior (Lee et al., 2009).

Therefore, we argue that it might not be necessary for influencers to have deliberately presented misleading information for Gen Z to develop negative feelings toward them; a mere perception of an influencer's posts or recommendations being controlled by a brand is sufficient to elicit negative feelings toward the influencer. Further, Gen Z will likely consider the endorsed brands to be guilty by association with the influencer (Thomas & Fowler, 2016).

Drawing on Lee et al. (2009) and Kuanr et al. (2022) and their definition of *brand avoidance*, we make a novel effort to introduce and define the concept of *influencer avoidance*. We define *influencer avoidance* as a phenomenon by which followers of influencers actively choose to shun them by avoiding or unfollowing their social media pages.

Gen Zers are distinguished by their search for truth, originality, and ethics in their relationship with influencers and brands alike (Feng et al., 2021; Munsch, 2021). Thus, they will likely avoid brands and influencers in the case of morally irresponsible acts or unethical behavior (Childers & Boatwright, 2021). This is congruent with the theory of moral responsibility, which focuses on the ethical norms of relationships among parties. Consequently, we draw on the theory of moral responsibility to conceptualize influencer avoidance and brand avoidance by Gen Z, and to posit our hypotheses.

## 2.2 | Theory of moral responsibility

The theory of moral responsibility encapsulates the notion of a moral agent and the conditions under which their actions are deemed to be morally responsible or irresponsible (Eshleman, 2014). In accordance with the theory of moral responsibility, individuals are moral agents when held morally responsible by society for performing an action voluntarily, and being aware of the consequences and reactions that it would beget from society (Fischer, 1986). Society demonstrates these reactive attitudes (e.g., blame/praise) because of the perpetrator's participation in interpersonal relationships (Eshleman, 2014). Consequently, we argue that influencers and traditional brands are moral agents and are expected to behave in a morally responsible manner. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that individuals will hold other human beings (i.e., influencers) or human-like entities (i.e., brands) morally responsible for their actions.

Members of Gen Z view any moral transgression of influencers negatively (Xie et al., 2019) because they expect brands to take responsibility for the actions of their stakeholders, such as suppliers and agents (Amaeshi et al., 2008). Irresponsible corporate actions beget negative reactions toward brands (Xie & Bagozzi, 2019) and because Gen Z is also concerned with ethical and responsible consumption brands are held accountable for their moral responsibility (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Goldring & Azab, 2021).

Brands and influencers, equally, are expected to uphold the ethics of autonomy, community, and divinity in their relationships with their followers and consumers. If followers/consumers perceive that any such ethics have been violated, they will develop negative moral emotions toward the brand and influencer. Accordingly, they will seek to ease their discomfort by using coping responses such as brand avoidance, spreading negative word of mouth, and getting revenge, among others (Kavaliauskė & Simonavičiūtė, 2015).

We argue that Gen Z considers brands commercially employing influencers and influencing their posts and recommendations to be transgressive and irresponsible. In such cases, Gen Z will likely hold both the brand and the influencer accountable for violating the ethics of autonomy by dictating consumer choices and, thus, infringing on consumer freedom. Consumers and followers consider it the duty and obligation of both brands and influencers to provide honest information about the products they recommend and about their intent in recommending them (Harrison, 2018; Holt, 2002); as such, Gen Z considers it a violation of community ethics when brands and

TABLE 1 Gen Z and SMI

Study	Antecedents	Outcome variable	Consumer group	Research design	Key findings
Dunley (2017)	Influencer Recommendations	Purchase Behavior	Gen Z	Literature Review	Influencer recommendations positively affect purchase behavior.
Gutfreund (2016)	Value for money, Goal fulfillment, Influencer Recommendations	Purchase Behavior	Gen Z	Case Analysis	Value for money, goal fulfillment and influencer recommendations positively affect purchase behavior.
Francis and Hoefel (2018)	Need for individuality, Ethical Consumption, Pragmatism	Consumption Behavior	Gen Z	Survey	Need for individuality, pragmatism and a focus on ethics drive consumption behavior.
Childers and Boatwright (2021)	Influencer Recommendations	Consumption Behavior	Generational Cohorts (X vs Y vs Z)	Qualitative Interviews	Influencer credibility (trust and transparency) mediates the relationship between influencer recommendations and consumption behavior.
Goldring and Azab (2021)	Need for uniqueness, Value Consciousness, Social Outcome Decision making, Influencer Recommendations	Consumption Behavior	Generational Cohorts (X vs Z)	Field Study	Need for uniqueness, value consciousness and social outcome decision making drive consumption behavior with emphasis on influencer recommendations.
Lou and Kim (2019)	Entertainment value of influencer content, Influencer expertise, Trustworthiness, Attractiveness, Similarity	Purchase Intentions	Gen Z	Survey	Entertainment value of influencer-generated content, influencer expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and followers' perceived similarity to influencers, are positively related to the perceived parasocial relationship (PSR). PSR in turn drives purchase intention.
Wielki (2020)	Influencer Recommendations	Purchase Decision	Gen Z	Literature Analysis and Survey	Influencer recommendations, mediated by trust and relationship strength drives purchase decision.
Sholz (2021)	Influencer Recommendations	Purchase Decision	Gen Z	Ethnography	Influencer recommendations drive purchase behavior, mediated by influencer's expertise, physical similarity, and trust.
Munsch (2021)	Influencer Generated Messages	Consumer Behavior	Gen Z	FGD, Online bulletin board, Interviews	Messages relayed by influencers are treated as more relevant and authentic.
Feng et al. (2024)	Influencer expertise, Influencer Ordinariness	Positive Affect	Gen Z	Big Data Analysis	Influencer expertise and ordinariness drive positive affect towards influencers.
Hossain (2018)	Negative experience, Goal Impediment, Privacy concerns, Advertising Clutter	Advertising Avoidance	Gen Z	Survey	Negative experience, goal impediment, privacy concerns and advertising clutter have positive effect on advertising avoidance.
Thangavel et al. (2019)	Value consciousness, Convenience, Contrast and compare	Shopping Orientation	Gen Z	Survey	Value consciousness, convenience and contrast and compare are dominant shopping orientations of Gen Z.

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Study	Antecedents	Outcome variable	Consumer group	Research design	Key findings
Hanifawati et al. (2019)	Influencer Recommendations	Brand Switching	Gen Z	Survey	Much less brand loyal Influencer recommendations, mediated by influencers expertise, product experience, objective arguments and influencer popularity affect brand switching behavior. Influencer's expertise, product experience, objective arguments and influencer popularity affect brand switching behavior of Gen Z.
This Study	Brand Control	Influencer, Avoidance, Brand Avoidance	Gen Z	Experimental Design	Brand Control positively affects influencer and brand avoidance mediated by negative moral emotion. Relationship strength and Influencer type act as moderators

influencers fail to do so. Consequently, when consumers/followers perceive those brands or influencers have committed either of the violations, they will perceive a moral transgression to have been committed. This will trigger negative emotions, giving rise to brand avoidance.

We apply the theory of moral responsibility to argue that when members of Gen Z perceive a brand to have exerted a high degree of creative control over an influencer's content, they will consider both the brand and the influencer to be guilty of a moral transgression—that is, to have violated the ethics of both autonomy and community. We go on to examine this relationship between brand control and avoidance behavior in the subsequent section. We present our conceptual model in Figure 1.

### 3 | HYPOTHESES

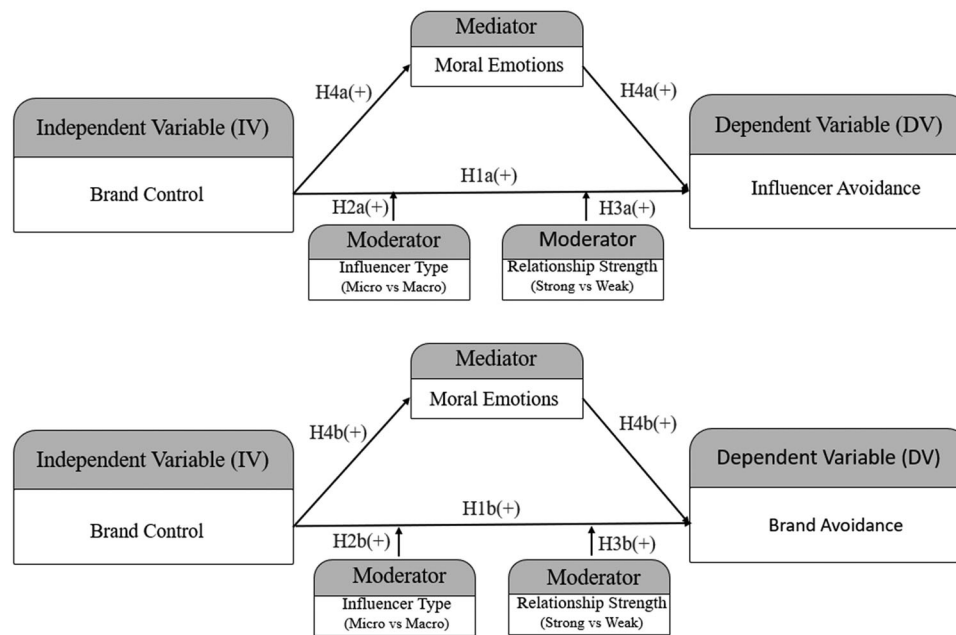
#### 3.1 | Brand control and avoidance behavior

Brand messages on social media are being increasingly viewed as intrusive and unreliable (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Rapid developments in information technology have made Gen Z more knowledgeable about brands and products, thereby reducing the amount of control that brands can exert over consumer perception (Swaminathan et al., 2020). This has been challenging for brands in general but is especially difficult for those that are not prepared to accept consumers as co-creators of the brand's image and meaning (Vernuccio & Ceccotti, 2015). Consequently, brands are increasingly adopting novel ways to reinvent and recreate their control over the conversations revolving around their image.

A common marketing strategy, used to exert indirect control over social media conversations, is to employ influencers (Leung et al., 2022a; Stubb & Colliander, 2019). Audrezet et al. (2020) classified the degree of control that brands wield over influencer messages into two categories: maximum encroachment and minimal encroachment. In the scenario of minimal encroachment, brands exercise no control over influencers' posts, apart from the mention of the product and brand (Audrezet et al., 2020; Stubb & Colliander, 2019). Thus, brands do not encroach on influencers' posts and recommendations.

In contrast, in the case of maximum encroachment, brands have commercial relationships with influencers. As a result, brands seize control of influencers' page, and endorse their products explicitly through the influencers' posts (Audrezet et al., 2020; Stubb & Colliander, 2019). In this scenario, therefore, brands exercise a high degree of control over influencers' posts by dictating the terms of communication. However, influencer-initiated conversations are expected to be unbiased and feel like word-of-mouth communication among peers (Carl, 2008) because Gen Z expects influencer recommendations to be free from brand control (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014). Brands however engage influencers with an aim of influencing and shaping consumer perceptions about the brands. Brands can then speak through the peer "who recommends a tried





**FIGURE 1** Conceptual model. Figure 1 graphically depicts the conceptual model used for the current study. Hypothesis 1 states that brand control will positively affect influencer avoidance (H1a) and brand avoidance (H1b). Hypothesis 2 states that influencer avoidance will be greater in the case of macro influencer as opposed to micro influencer (H2a) and brand avoidance will be greater in the case of macro influencer as opposed to micro influencer (H2b). Hypothesis 3 states that influencer avoidance will be greater when consumers enjoy a strong relationship as opposed to weak relationship with the influencer (H3a); brand avoidance will be greater when consumers enjoy a strong relationship as opposed to weak relationship with the brand (H3b). Hypothesis 4 states that negative moral emotion acts as a mediator between brand control and influencer avoidance (H4a) as well between brand control and brand avoidance as well (H4b).

and trusted product” rather than the “salesman who tries to get rid of merchandise” (Dichter, 1966; p. 165). This phenomenon resembles the concept of distorted communication, wherein brands control information that is exchanged, thus exerting ideological domination by violating the norms of legitimacy and sincerity (Habermas, 1985).

Gen Z are well equipped to identify when brands are dictating their individual choices. They hold both product brands and human brands responsible for moral transgression and adopt punitive measures for any violation of implicit or explicit rules guiding a relationship (Aaker et al., 2004). The theory of moral responsibility asserts that relationship morality is usually based on three distinct ethics—autonomy, community, and divinity (Shweder et al., 1997). The ethics of autonomy seeks to protect individuals' choices and preferences, and a violation of this type of ethics occurs when an action infringes upon the freedom/rights of individuals (Rozin et al., 1999). The ethics of community focuses on moral integrity and holds that individuals must diligently carry out their duties and obligations to the community (Rozin et al., 1999). The ethics of divinity is concerned with the protection of nature and of oneself from impurity or degradation (Shweder et al., 1997). Based upon these three ethics, individuals judge whether a moral irresponsibility/transgression has been committed. In accordance with the theory of moral responsibility, moral transgression is deemed to have been committed when all or any of the three distinct forms of ethics are violated by one of the parties in a relationship. Thus, we argue that when brands exert control over Gen Z consumers by utilizing influencers, they violate

the norms of their relationship with them. Similarly, when influencers surrender to brand control, they overemphasize the need to try a product or brand and, thus, attempt to dictate the consumption choices of their followers; this represents a violation of the norms of the relationship of influencers with their followers. Thus, brands and influencers violate the ethics of autonomy and the ethics of community and, based on those violations, can be held morally responsible for their actions.

Thus, when Gen Zers perceive those brands to have usurped control over influencers' posts and recommendations, they treat this as an act of moral transgression; they hold both the brands and influencers, owing to their close association, accountable and thus blameworthy (Cocker et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2022). This perceived sense of moral transgression triggers avoidance behavior toward both the brands and the influencers (Romani et al., 2012; Thomson, 2006). Thus, we posit the following hypotheses:

**H1a:** Brand control increases influencer avoidance.

**H1b:** Brand control increases brand avoidance.

### 3.2 | Moderating role of influencer type (micro vs. macro)

Influencers can be categorized into segments depending on various criteria, one of which is follower count. In terms of follower count,

influencers can be divided into the following segments: celebrity influencers, whose fame pre-dates social media (more than 1,000,000 followers); mega influencers (more than 1,000,000 followers); macro influencers (100,000–1,000,000 followers); micro influencers (10,000–100,000 followers); and nano influencers (0–10,000 followers) (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Campbell and Farrell (2020), in their study on the functional components of influencer marketing, assert that micro and macro influencers are the most useful for brands because of their accessibility and authenticity as compared to bigger influencers. Vrontis et al. (2021), in their review of the literature related to influencer marketing, stress the need to study the impact of different types of influencers on follower reactions. We thus investigate whether the type of influencer (i.e., micro vs. macro) serves as a boundary condition for the relationship between brand control and brand/influencer avoidance.

Consumers use follower count as a cue to judge the credibility of a source (De Veirman et al., 2017). Additionally, consumers find the recommendations of influencers with a larger number of followers more credible, as compared with recommendations of influencers with fewer followers (Jin & Phua, 2014; Pozharliev et al., 2022). Furthermore, macro influencers are expected to be more knowledgeable about the brands they work with, as compared to micro influencers (Lin et al., 2018), and arguably yield greater interpersonal influence (De Veirman et al., 2017). Thus, drawing on the extant literature related to influencer marketing, we argue that macro influencers—who are endowed with expertise and credibility—are considered more responsible in representing information than micro influencers. Moreover, members of Gen Z who value influencer expertise (Feng et al., 2021) likely expect macro influencers to be more responsible than micro influencers in their conduct.

Based on the arguments presented above, and drawing on the theory of moral responsibility, we argue that Gen Z consumers evaluate macro influencers using more stringent standards than they do micro influencers for any transgression, as the former are more likely to be held accountable for their conduct. Because Gen Z consumers view the transgressions of macro influencers more severely than those of micro influencers, their negative reactions in case of a transgression are also magnified, as they hold macro influencers morally responsible to a greater degree. As a result, they will actively ignore the recommendations of, or even unfollow, the influencers, thus leading to influencer avoidance.

**H2a:** *Influencer type moderates the relationship between brand control and influencer avoidance such that consumers are more (vs. less) likely to avoid a macro (vs. micro) influencer.*

Similarly, Gen Z holds brands guilty of moral transgression when they use influencers to dictate consumer choices, in contrast to the desires and expectations of consumers. This, in turn, evokes avoidance behavior among Gen Z consumers. Because macro influencers are considered more trustworthy than micro influencers (Janssen et al., 2021), Gen Z views brands associated with the former more positively than those linked to the latter. In contrast, when

brands commit transgressive and morally irresponsible acts, Gen Z reacts more severely toward brands associated with macro influencers than those in alliance with micro influencers. This negative reaction can trigger avoidance behavior in Gen Z consumers. As such, we advance the following hypothesis:

**H2b:** *Influencer type moderates the relationship between brand control and brand avoidance such that consumers are more (vs. less) likely to avoid a brand in the case of macro (vs. micro) influencers.*

### 3.3 | Moderating role of relationship strength

*Relationship strength* in social media can be defined as “the degree to which bonds among members of a social networking service are strong or weak” (Kim & Kim, 2021; p. 226). A strong relationship signifies a resilient bond between influencer and followers, while a weak relationship represents a fragile bond between influencer and followers. Relationship strength is measured in terms of trust, commitment, and frequency of communication (Gregoire et al., 2009). Thus, followers who enjoy a strong relationship and bond with an influencer also have a greater degree of trust and commitment towards the influencer with frequent communication on a one-to-one basis. In contrast, a weak influencer–follower relationship represents a frailer bond and a lower degree of trust and commitment towards the influencer, as well as less frequent one-to-one communication.

Followers who have a strong relationship with influencers are more likely to react negatively if they perceive the influencers to have committed a transgression of their relational norms (Aggarwal, 2004). This is so because followers who maintain a strong relationship (as opposed to the followers who have a weak relationship) believe that the influencers owe them the truth and, thus, feel betrayed when they are found to have intentionally committed a moral transgression (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). Stated differently, Gen Z consumers with strong relationships with influencers experience betrayal when they perceive the influencer has violated their trust by being dishonest in sharing their opinions and by intentionally ceding control to the hegemony of brands; therefore, such Gen Z consumers are more likely to exhibit avoidance behavior. Thus, we advance the following hypothesis:

**H3a:** *Relationship strength moderates the relationship between brand control and influencer avoidance such that consumers are more (vs. less) likely to avoid an influencer in the case of a strong (vs. weak) relationship.*

In the same vein, consumers who enjoy a strong relationship with a particular brand have a higher degree of trust and commitment towards the brand than do consumers with a weak relationship because they expect the brand to be honest in its representations. Gen Z consumers with a strong relationship feel more betrayed, compared to their counterparts with a weak relationship, when they

perceive that the brand has committed a moral transgression by manipulating influencers to their advantage (Wielki, 2020). Thus, Gen Z consumers with a strong relationship are more likely to avoid such brands compared to those with a weak relationship. Thus, we posit the following hypothesis:

**H3b:** *Relationship strength moderates the relationship between brand control and brand avoidance such that consumers are more (vs. less) likely to avoid a brand in the case of a strong (vs. weak) relationship.*

### 3.4 | Mediating role of negative moral emotions

Gen Z expects brands and influencers to respect the norms of their relationship by acting in a morally responsible manner—that is, by upholding the ethics of the relationship. Consequently, when such relationship ethics are violated, moral transgression is deemed to have been committed. Gen Z will hold brands and influencers accountable for violations of relationship ethics when they perceive that the brands have seized control over the influencers' posts by manipulating information. This perceived moral violation, will, in turn, evoke the negative moral emotion of anger (Xie & Bagozzi, 2019).

The evoked anger elicits a sense of discomfort. To vent this discomfort, Gen Z will exhibit negative reactions, such as brand avoidance, negative word of mouth, rejection, and revenge towards both brand and influencer (Grappi et al., 2013; Haidt, 2003). We argue, therefore, that Gen Z will avoid influencers and brands to vent the discomfort evoked by anger; the anger that has been caused by a perceived moral transgression on the part of both entities—that is, brands and influencers. Thus, we advance the following hypotheses:

**H4a:** *The negative moral emotion of anger mediates the relationship between brand control and influencer avoidance.*

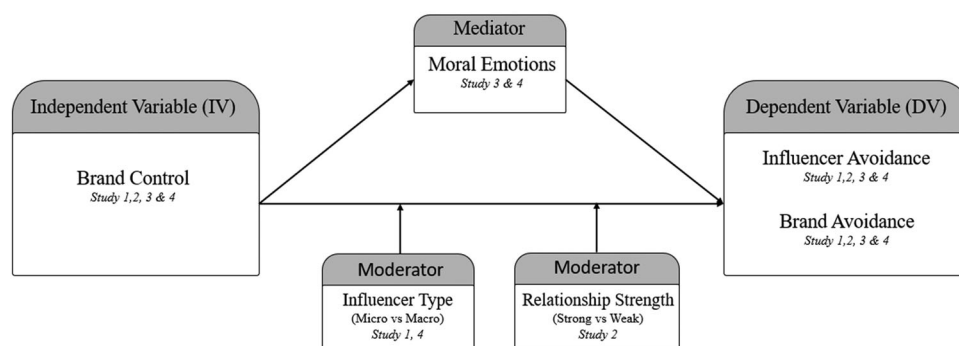
**H4b:** *The negative moral emotion of anger mediates the relationship between brand control and brand avoidance.*

## 4 | OVERVIEW OF THE STUDIES AND EMPIRICAL APPROACH

We conducted three experimental studies and one quasi-experimental study. In Study 1, we examine followers' reactions by manipulating the variables of brand control (i.e., high brand control vs. low brand control) and influencer type (i.e., macro vs. micro) to determine their effect on influencer avoidance and brand avoidance (i.e., testing H1a and H1b, and H2a and H2b, respectively). Study 2 investigates follower reactions by manipulating the variables of brand control and relationship strength (i.e., strong vs. weak) to determine their effect on influencer avoidance and brand avoidance (i.e., testing H1a and H1b, and H3a and H3b, respectively). In Study 3, we examine the mediating effect of negative moral emotions (i.e., anger) in the relationship between brand control and influencer and brand avoidance (i.e., testing H1, H4a, and H4b). In Study 4, we probe the impact of brand control on avoidance behavior using a different product category (i.e., a lifestyle brand), a different (fictitious) influencer, and respondents from a different platform (i.e., Prolific). We did this to increase the generalizability of our findings. We present studies' overview in Figure 2.

### 4.1 | Study 1

In Study 1, we investigated how brand control and influencer type affect followers' reactions in terms of influencer and brand avoidance. We predicted that brand control would positively influence both influencer and brand avoidance. We hypothesized that influencer and brand avoidance would be amplified in the case of macro influencers to a greater degree than it is in the case of micro influencers. To examine this, we used a 2 (brand control: high vs. low)  $\times$  2 (influencer type: macro vs. micro) between-subject design. We further used a scenario-based experiment to control for confounding influences and ensure high internal validity.



**FIGURE 2** Overview of studies. Figure 2 graphically depicts the conceptual model of the four studies that we undertook for this study paper. All four studies have brand control as the independent variable and influencer avoidance and brand avoidance as dependent variables. Study 1 tests effect of influencer type as a moderator, Study 2 tests the effect of relationship strength as a moderator and Study 3 tests the role of moral emotions as a mediator. Study 4 validates the findings of the prior studies and evaluates the moderated mediation effect.



### 4.1.1 | Participants

A total of 105 participants between the ages of 18 and 24 (i.e., members of Gen Z) were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk; 54.29% female, 45.71% male;  $M_{\text{age}} = 24$ ), following guidelines from past research (Paolacci et al., 2010). We recruited participants from the United States with a human intelligence task (HIT) approval rate of 98% or higher, in accordance with the qualification criteria used in academic studies to facilitate the receipt of high-quality responses.

### 4.1.2 | Manipulation stimuli and experimental procedure

We designed this experiment to examine people's responses to different Instagram posts. Participants initially signed an informed consent declaration. We then asked them to look at an Instagram account biography (to manipulate for influencer type), followed by a screenshot of a post by the influencer (to manipulate for brand control). The manipulations varied for men and women, with each gender being exposed to an influencer belonging to the same gender; only the image of the influencer was changed, while all other content remained the same. The questionnaire started with manipulations of the variables of influencer type and brand control, followed by manipulation checks, questions about influencer and brand avoidance, and, last, control and demographic questions.

The final stimulus comprised two screenshots: An Instagram account biography, and one post by the influencer, who specialized in fitness content. The materials were the same in each condition except for the manipulations. The influencer's handle was fictitious: "myhollywoodbody." However, we used real images from the account of a real influencer (who was from a different country than the respondents, to control for familiarity). A lesser-known protein brand, "myprotein," was used to represent the endorsed brand. We consulted and used the accounts and posts of real influencers and real brands to ensure the quality and credibility of the pictures used for the experiment.

The variable of influencer type was manipulated using the influencer's number of followers: in the micro-influencer condition, 18k followers were shown, while in the macro-influencer condition, 188k followers were shown (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). The Instagram biographies were identical in each condition. Each participant was shown an overview of the account (see Appendix A) and a text introducing the influencer (e.g., "Shown below is the account of a social media influencer, myhollywoodbody. She is a lifestyle and fitness enthusiast who is active on Instagram. She has 188k followers.)."

Following the biography, participants were shown an Instagram post by the influencer. These posts were similar to actual posts from an influencer's real account (see Appendix A). In the high brand control scenario, the brand was placed prominently, such that the brand name was visible in the image. The brand was tagged in the

post. We used words, such as "discount offers", and "make sure to check out the product" in the content of the influencer's post. We created a higher number of hashtags (as compared to the low brand control condition) to push the product, such as #salesale, #healthyating, and #fitnessmotivation, among others. The brand name was also mentioned in the hashtag.

In contrast, in the low brand control scenario, the brand was relegated to a non-prominent position, such as the background. Though the brand was not tagged in the post, it was mentioned in the hashtags. We used a fewer number of hashtags (as compared to the high brand control scenario) which did not overtly push the product, such as #health, and #fitnessjourney. The content of the post indicated the importance of protein powder (i.e., the product), whereas it did not mention the brand, in contrast to a high brand control condition (explicitly showing the brand). We kept the number of likes for both the high and low brand control conditions constant (i.e., 2,897).

### 4.1.3 | Measures

#### 4.1.3.1 | Dependent variables

To measure influencer avoidance behavior, we asked participants to indicate their agreement with items on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly agree, 7 = strongly disagree). The items included, "I would keep as much distance as possible between myhollywoodbody and myself," "I would avoid frequenting the Instagram page of myhollywoodbody," and "I would stop following myhollywoodbody" (adapted from Grégoire et al., 2009). To measure brand avoidance behavior, participants were asked to indicate their agreement, on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly agree, 7 = strongly disagree) with items such as, "I would keep as much distance as possible between myprotein and myself," "I would cut off my relationship with myprotein," and "I would withdraw my business from myprotein" (adapted from Grégoire et al., 2009).

#### 4.1.3.2 | Manipulation checks

We measured influencer type by asking participants to indicate the number of followers they thought the influencer had (using the item, "How big a follower base you believe myhollywoodbody has?") on a 7-point scale (1 = moderately small, 7 = very large). We measured brand control by asking participants to indicate, on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly agree, 7 = strongly disagree), the extent to which they agreed with the statement, "myprotein supervises the content created by the influencer."

#### 4.1.3.3 | Control variables

Participants were questioned regarding their familiarity with the brand and the influencer. Additionally, participants' fitness orientation was measured using the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (MBRSQ) (Cash, 2018). Information regarding participants' age, sex, education, and annual income was also collected.

#### 4.1.4 | Results

When manipulation checks were conducted for the macro-influencer condition ( $M = 5.56$ , standard deviation [SD] = 0.89), 88.6% correctly indicated that the influencer had a slightly large to very large number of followers; in the micro-influencer condition ( $M = 4.40$ ,  $SD = 1.291$ ), 81.1% of the participants agreed that the influencer had very small to slightly large number of followers. Similarly, the difference was indicated to be significant ( $F = 7.11$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ); thus, participants perceived the two influencers to differ with respect to their number of followers. Participants also correctly identified the high brand control condition ( $M = 4.73$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) to differ from the low brand control condition ( $M = 2.17$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) significantly ( $F = 50.92$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, participants perceived the high brand control condition differently from the low brand control condition. In addition, both brand familiarity ( $M = 2.74$ ,  $SD = 1.301$ ) and influencer familiarity ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 1.391$ ) were low, confirming a low familiarity of the sample with the brand and the influencer.

Consistent with H1a, a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) found a significant main effect of brand control on influencer avoidance, meaning that influencer avoidance behavior increased as brand control increased ( $M_{\text{high}} = 3.38$ ,  $M_{\text{low}} = 2.82$ ,  $F[1, 105] = 5.46$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $p = 0.021$ ). Moreover, we found a significant main effect of influencer type on influencer avoidance ( $M_{\text{macro}} = 3.44$ ,  $M_{\text{micro}} = 2.76$ ;  $F[1, 105] = 7.999$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ). In accordance with H2a, a two-way ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect of brand control and influencer type on influencer avoidance ( $F[1, 105] = 4.882$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $p = 0.029$ ); see Figure 3. We found that people are more likely to punish high brand control by avoiding the influencer if the influencer is a macro rather than micro influencer. The control variables of fitness orientation ( $F[1, 105] = 2.441$ ,  $p < 0.1$ ) and gender

( $F[1, 105] = 1.406$ ,  $p < 0.1$ ) had an insignificant effect on +influencer avoidance.

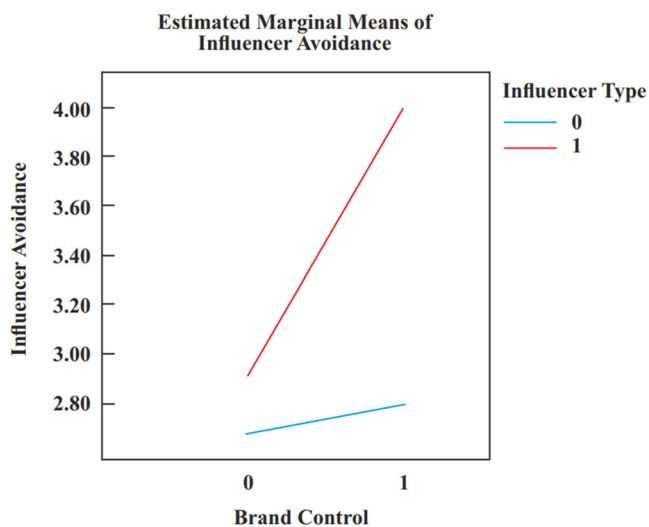
Consistent with H1b, a two-way ANOVA found a significant main effect of brand control on brand avoidance, meaning that brand avoidance behavior increased as brand control increased ( $M_{\text{high}} = 3.48$ ,  $M_{\text{low}} = 2.83$ ,  $F [1, 105] = 6.471$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ). Moreover, we found a significant main effect of influencer type on brand avoidance ( $M_{\text{macro}} = 3.48$ ,  $M_{\text{micro}} = 2.82$ ;  $F [1, 105] = 6.715$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $p = 0.011$ ). In accordance with H2b, a two-way ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect of brand control and influencer type on brand avoidance ( $F[1, 105] = 6.277$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $p = 0.014$ ); see Figure 4. We found that people are more likely to punish high brand control by avoiding the brand if the influencer is a macro rather than micro influencer. The control variables of fitness orientation ( $F [1, 105] = 0.829$ ,  $p < 0.1$ ) and gender ( $F [1, 105] = 3.549$ ,  $p < 0.1$ ) had an insignificant effect on influencer avoidance.

#### 4.1.5 | Discussion

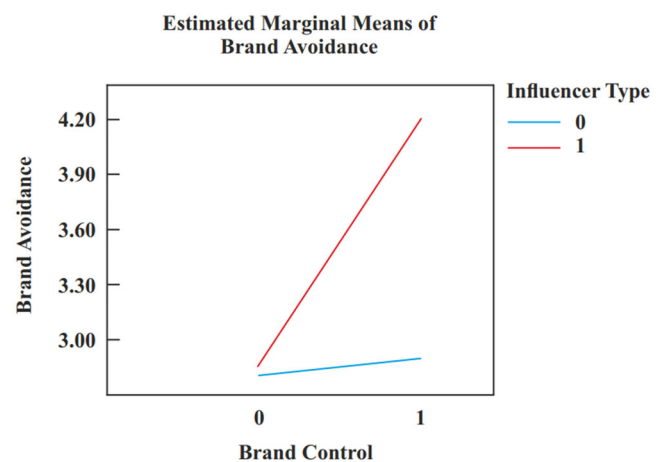
In sum, we demonstrate that brand control interacts with influencer type to affect influencer and brand avoidance behavior. Avoidance reactions to brand control are magnified in the case of macro influencers as compared to micro influencers. We did not find any effect of gender or fitness orientation on avoidance behavior.

## 4.2 | Study 2

In Study 2, we investigated how brand control and relationship strength affect influencer and brand avoidance. We predicted that brand control would positively affect both influencer and brand avoidance; in other words, followers are more likely to avoid influencers and brands in the case of a strong than a weak



**FIGURE 3** Moderating effect of influencer type – micro influencer (0) and macro influencer (1) in the relationship between Brand Control and Influencer Avoidance.



**FIGURE 4** Moderating effect of influencer type – micro influencer (0) and macro influencer (1) in the relationship between Brand Control and Brand Avoidance.

relationship. To examine this, we applied a 2 (brand control: high vs. low)  $\times$  2 (relationship strength: strong vs. weak) between-subject design. The study utilized a scenario-based experiment to control for confounding influences and ensure a high internal validity.

#### 4.2.1 | Participants

We recruited 170 participants online through MTurk (38.24% female, 61.76% male;  $M_{\text{age}} = 24$ ), following the guidelines used in Study 1.

#### 4.2.2 | Manipulation stimuli and experimental procedure

Similar to Study 1, this experiment sought to measure people's responses to different Instagram posts. Participants initially signed an informed consent declaration, and then viewed the influencer's Instagram biography. Next, we provided them with a vignette on relationship strength, and showed them a screenshot of a post by the influencer (to manipulate the variable of brand control), as in Study 1 (see Appendix A). One such post was provided for each gender cohort, and this was followed up with a questionnaire, similar to Study 1.

Relationship strength was manipulated based on cues regarding the duration for which the participant had followed the influencer (Kim & Kim, 2021). The text for the condition of a strong relationship was as follows: "Imagine that you have known myhollywoodbody for a long period of time. You almost always view his videos and posts. You communicate with him on a bi-monthly basis and have a moderate to high degree of trust in his tips. Keeping the aforementioned scenario in mind, answer the questions that follow." The text for the condition of a weak relationship was as follows: "Imagine that you have known myhollywoodbody for a short period. You occasionally watch his videos and posts. You have, at times, communicated with him—say, less than once a month over an entire year—and you have a moderate degree of trust in his tips. Keeping the aforementioned scenario in mind, answer the questions that follow."

#### 4.2.3 | Measures

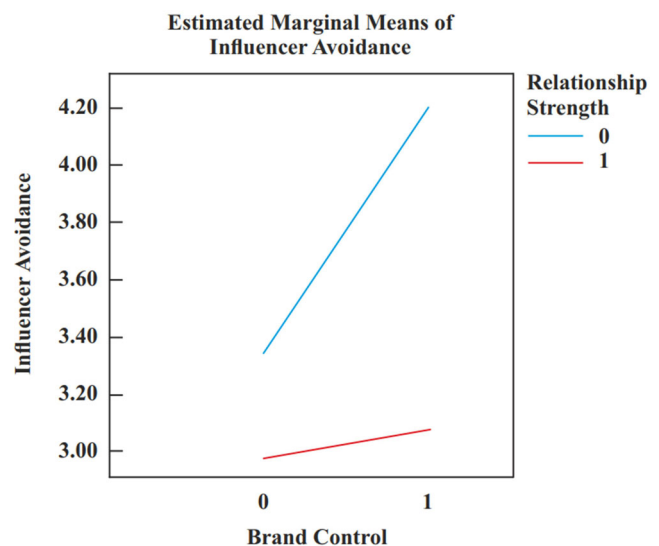
The dependent variables, manipulation checks, and control variables were similar to those in Study 1, except for the manipulation check for relationship strength. Relationship strength was measured by asking participants to indicate (1) the length of the relationship they had had with the influencer—using the item, "I have been following posts and updates from myhollywoodbody for a long duration of time," on a seven-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)—and (2) their level of trust in the influencer's posts—using the item, "myhollywoodbody can be relied upon on his content," on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

#### 4.2.4 | Results

According to manipulation checks for a strong relationship based on a long relationship duration ( $M = 5.32$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ), 71.3% of participants agreed they had been following the influencer for a long time; in the case of a weak relationship based on relationship duration ( $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = 1.321$ ), 60.2% of the participants disagreed that they had been following the influencer for a long time. This difference was significant ( $F = 5.23$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Similarly, the difference in relationship strength based on high trust ( $M = 5.11$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ) and low trust ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) was significant ( $F = 6.57$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Thus, participants perceived the two influencers to differ in terms of their relationship with them.

The participants correctly identified the high brand control condition ( $M = 5.13$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ) differed from the low brand control condition ( $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ) significantly ( $F = 37.18$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). In addition, brand familiarity ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = 1.126$ ) and influencer familiarity ( $M = 2.59$ ,  $SD = 1.128$ ) were low, thereby confirming low familiarity of the sample with the brand and the influencer.

Consistent with H1a, two-way ANOVA showed a small significant main effect of brand control on influencer avoidance, meaning that influencer avoidance behavior increased as brand control increased ( $M_{\text{high}} = 3.59$ ,  $M_{\text{low}} = 3.18$ ,  $F[1, 170] = 5.46$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $p = 0.032$ ). Moreover, we found a significant main effect of relationship strength on influencer avoidance ( $M_{\text{hrs}} = 3.044$ ,  $M_{\text{lrs}} = 3.735$ ;  $F[1, 170] = 13.617$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ). In accordance with H3a, two-way ANOVA revealed a small significant interaction effect of brand control and relationship strength on influencer avoidance ( $F[1, 170] = 3.581$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $p = 0.060$ ; see Figure 5). We found that people are more likely to punish high brand control by avoiding an influencer if they have a weak relationship than if they have a strong relationship. The control variables of fitness orientation



**FIGURE 5** Moderating effect of relationship strength – weak (0) and strong (1) in the relationship between Brand Control and Influencer Avoidance.

( $F[1, 170] = 1.395, p < 0.1$ ) and gender ( $F[1, 170] = 1.698, p < 0.1$ ) had an insignificant effect on influencer avoidance.

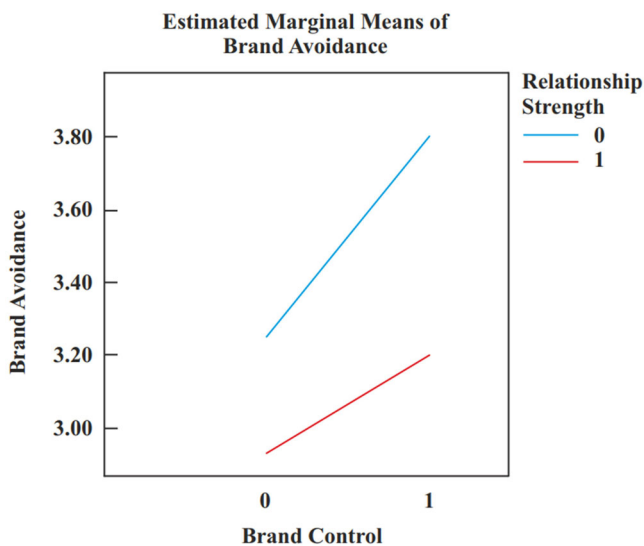
Consistent with H1b, two-way ANOVA found a small significant main effect of brand control on brand avoidance; brand avoidance behavior increased as brand control increased ( $M_{\text{high}} = 3.48, M_{\text{low}} = 3.10, F[1, 170] = 3.579, p < 0.05, p = 0.060$ ). We found a significant main effect of relationship strength on brand avoidance ( $M_{\text{hrs}} = 3.04, M_{\text{lrs}} = 3.54; F[1, 170] = 6.440, p < 0.01, p = 0.012$ ). Contrary to the predictions of H3b, two-way ANOVA revealed an insignificant interaction effect of brand control and relationship strength on brand avoidance ( $F[1, 170] = 0.372, p > 0.1, p = 0.543$ ); see Figure 6. The control variables of fitness orientation ( $F[1, 170] = 2.538, p < 0.1$ ) and gender ( $F[1, 105] = 0.538, p < 0.1$ ) had an insignificant effect on influencer avoidance.

#### 4.2.5 | Discussion

In Study 2, we demonstrate that brand control interacts with relationship strength to affect influencer avoidance and brand avoidance behavior. The adverse reaction of consumers to brand control is accentuated when influencers have a weak, rather than strong, relationship with followers. In other words, relationship strength provides insurance against avoidance in the case of brand and influencer transgressions. We did not find any effect of gender or fitness orientation on avoidance behavior.

### 4.3 | Study 3

Our objectives in Study 3 were to retest H1a and H1b, to assess the robustness of the results obtained from studies 1 and 2, and to



**FIGURE 6** Moderating effect of relationship strength – weak (0) and strong (1), in the relationship between Brand Control and Brand Avoidance.

present a better understanding of the nature of focused interaction via a cross-sectional evaluation of the mediation model (H4). For this reason, we investigated the variations in influencer and brand avoidance among the participants as a reaction to brand control, as well as the mediating effects of negative moral emotions (i.e., anger). This study involved participants being presented with the brand control stimulus used in Study 1 and then being asked to respond to measures of brand control, negative moral emotions, and dependent variables.

#### 4.3.1 | Participants

We recruited 170 participants through MTurk (34.71% female, 65.29% male;  $M_{\text{age}} = 24$ ), following guidelines similar to those used in studies 1 and 2.

#### 4.3.2 | Measures

Participants were exposed to brand control manipulation similar to that shown in Study 1. We measured brand control using scales from Martínez-López et al. (2020). The negative moral emotion of anger was measured with three items, each of which used a 7-point scale (1 = very weak, 7 = very strong). Specifically, participants were asked the following: “Based on the information you just read, please express the degrees to which you feel the following emotions: ‘angry,’ ‘mad,’ and ‘very annoyed’” (Xie et al., 2015). We then measured the dependent variables (i.e., influencer and brand avoidance).

#### 4.3.3 | Results

We used partial least squares (PLS) path modeling to simultaneously estimate both the measurement and structural components of the model. The convergent validity of the model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988) was supported, as the average variance extracted (AVE) for all constructs was  $> 0.5$ . The composite reliability (CR) indices ranged from 0.85 to 0.90, thus showing evidence of convergent validity (see Table 2).

To test the discriminant validity, we used latent variable correlations, the square root of AVE, and heterotrait–monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) (Henseler et al., 2015). The square root of AVE for each construct exceeded the correlation shared between one construct and others in the model (see Table 3).

The convergent validity of the model indicated the effects of brand control on influencer and brand avoidance. Brand control had a positive and significant effect on influencer avoidance (H1:  $b = 0.225, p = 0.000$ ) and brand avoidance (H1:  $b = 0.257, p = 0.000$ ). Similarly, brand control had a positive and significant influence on negative moral emotions ( $b = 0.180, p = 0.027$ ). Negative moral emotions had a positive and significant effect on influencer avoidance ( $b = 0.442, p = 0.000$ ) and brand avoidance ( $b = 0.530, p = 0.000$ ). The proposed

**TABLE 2** Measurement of constructs used in the study

Construct and items	Loadings	A	C.R	AVE
<b>Moral Emotions Anger</b>		0.923	0.951	0.865
Based on the post from myhollywoodbods that you just read, please express the degree to which you feel the following emotions:				
Angry	0.926			
Mad	0.949			
Very Annoyed	0.915			
<b>Brand Avoidance</b>		0.911	0.942	0.843
Keep as much distance as possible between myprotein and me	0.918			
Cut off the relationship with myprotein	0.933			
Withdraw my business from myprotein	0.904			
<b>Brand Control</b>		0.891	0.803	0.582
myprotein supervises the content created by myhollywoodbody	0.707			
The information that myhollywoodbody wishes to share with his followers must first be filtered by myprotein	0.917			
myprotein controls the flow of information between myhollywoodbody and his followers	0.637			
<b>Influencer Avoidance</b>		0.879	0.916	0.783
Keep as much distance as possible between myhollywoodbody and me	0.895			
Avoid frequenting the Instagram page of myhollywoodbody	0.888			
Stop following myhollywoodbody	0.872			

**TABLE 3** Correlations among variables

Fornell-Larcker criterion	1	2	3	4
1. Anger	0.93			
2. Brand Avoidance	0.576	0.918		
3. Brand Control	0.18	0.352	0.763	
4. Influencer Avoidance	0.483	0.715	0.305	0.885

mediating effects (H4a) among brand control and influencer avoidance also showed a significant and positive result ( $b = 0.080$ ,  $p = 0.027$ ). Similarly, the proposed mediating effects (H4b) among brand control and influencer avoidance also showed a significant and positive result ( $b = 0.096$ ,  $p = 0.020$ ). Overall, the model explained 28.2% of the variance in influencer avoidance and 39.5% of the variance in brand avoidance (see Table 4).

#### 4.3.4 | Discussion

In Study 3, we demonstrate that the negative moral emotion of anger mediates the relationship between brand control and influencer avoidance, as well as that between brand control and brand avoidance. This study further demonstrates that brand control

germinates individuals' anger, which leads to adverse outcomes such as brand and influencer avoidance.

## 4.4 | Study 4

Study 4 had several objectives. First, it served as a replication study to test the general model over a different sample of consumers. Second, it used a different influencer and a service—rather than a product, which was used in earlier studies—to further generalize the conceptual model. Third, the conditions of both high and low brand control were used, with the intention of representing a paid endorsement; therefore, a disclosure was added in the stimulus to replicate a real-world setting. Finally, the study replicated the general mediation effect of brand control on influencer and brand avoidance through negative moral emotions and the moderation effect of influencer type.

### 4.4.1 | Participants

In total, 271 participants (64.5% female, 35.5% male; average age: 22.11 years) were recruited using Prolific ([www.prolific.ac](http://www.prolific.ac)) for the purpose of this study and received financial compensation for their participation. Prolific offers fair payment to study participants and



TABLE 4 Structural model results

Path	Original sample	Sample mean	Std. deviation	T-statistics	p-Values
Anger → Brand Avoidance	0.53	0.512	0.062	8.543	0
Anger → Influencer Avoidance	0.442	0.43	0.071	6.208	0
Brand Control → Anger	0.18	0.21	0.081	2.221	0.027
Brand Control → Brand Avoidance	0.257	0.285	0.067	3.84	0
Brand Control → Influencer Avoidance	0.225	0.246	0.075	3.014	0.003
Brand Control → Anger → Influencer Avoidance	0.08	0.089	0.036	2.213	0.027
Brand Control → Anger → Brand Avoidance	0.096	0.107	0.041	2.331	0.02

has been found to provide high-quality data from a more diverse sample compared to MTurk (Peer et al., 2017).

#### 4.4.2 | Manipulation stimuli and experimental procedure

Similar to Study 1, this experiment sought to measure people's responses to different Instagram posts. Participants initially signed an informed consent declaration, and then viewed the influencer's Instagram biography. Following the account overview, participants were shown an Instagram post by the influencer. The manipulations did not vary between men and women. The questionnaire started with manipulations of influencer type and brand control, followed by manipulation checks and questions on influencer and brand avoidance; the questionnaire ended with a control question about advertising recognition and questions related to demographics.

The final stimulus comprised two screenshots: An Instagram account biography, and a post by an influencer who specialized in travel and lifestyle. However, for the purpose of this study, we gave the influencer a fictitious name: "thetraveller." We used a real brand, to ensure the quality and credibility of the pictures used for the experiment. We manipulated the influencer type using number of followers: we showed 18k followers for the micro-influencer condition, and 188k followers for the macro-influencer condition (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). As in studies 1 and 2, in this study, the level of brand control (i.e., high vs. low) was manipulated using Instagram posts by the influencer. In this study, the influencer was seen as being associated with Hard Rock Café, a well-known brand. The level of brand control was indicated using both pictorial and textual manipulations. In the high brand control scenario, the influencer could be seen prominently pointing towards the brand. The brand was tagged multiple times in the post. We used a higher number of hashtags (compared to the low brand control condition), such as #surprise offer for both high and low brand control conditions. The content of the post explicitly pushed the followers to visit Hard Rock Café (the brand) with content, such as "If you have not visited @HardRockCafe, yet, you must do so soon", "Use code #thetraveller for an EXCLUSIVE SURPRIIIIISE OFFER", "VISIT SOOOON @HardRockCafe", among others. In the low brand control

condition, the influencer was posing inside the café. The brand/café name was not visible in the image; however, the brand was tagged in the post and we utilized a fewer number of hashtags (as opposed to higher brand control). The posts did not explicitly push the followers to visit Hard Rock Café, unlike the high brand control scenario. Instead, the influencer described her experience of visiting Hard Rock Café and added a suggestion that followers could visit the café, with the line - "If you too are a lover of the amalgamation between old school and modern rock, then you should visit @HardRockCafe". This contrasts with the high brand control scenario which explicitly endorses the café and encourages people to visit the café.

According to Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) guidelines, when an influencer uses Instagram to post an advertisement, they need to make this immediately clear on their post (Hayes, 2021). As such, "#AD" was prominently included in both the high and low brand control posts, to clearly inform participants about the nature of the post.

##### 4.4.2.1 | Dependent variables

As in Study 1, to measure influencer avoidance behavior, we asked the participants to indicate their agreement on a seven-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Items included, "I would keep as much distance as possible between thetraveller and myself," "I would avoid frequenting the Instagram page of thetraveller," and "I would stop following thetraveller" (adapted from Grégoire et al., 2009). To measure brand avoidance behavior, participants were again asked to indicate their agreement on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly agree, 7 = strongly disagree). Here, the items included, "I would keep as much distance as possible between Hard Rock Cafe and myself," "I would cut off my relationship with Hard Rock Cafe," and "I would withdraw my business from Hard Rock Cafe" (adapted from Grégoire et al., 2009).

##### 4.4.2.2 | Manipulation checks

We measured influencer type by asking participants to indicate the number of followers they thought the influencer had ("How big a follower base do you believe thetraveller has?"), on a 7-point scale (1 = moderately small, 7 = very large). We measured brand control by asking participants to indicate, on a seven-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), the extent to which they agreed with

the statement, "Hard Rock Cafe supervises the content created by the influencer."

#### 4.4.2.3 | Control variables

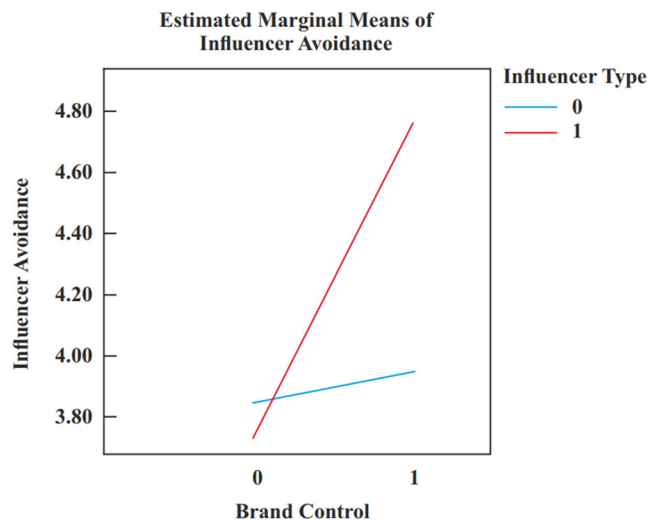
Advertising recognition was included as a control variable. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they thought the Instagram post was advertising, on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; Evans et al., 2017). We also collected data on the age, sex, education, and annual income of the participants.

#### 4.4.3 | Results

In manipulation checks for the macro-influencer condition ( $M = 5.06$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ), 85.5% correctly revealed that the influencer had a slightly large to very large number of followers; in the case of the micro-influencer condition ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 1.291$ ), 72.2% of the participants agreed that the influencer had a very small to slightly small number of followers. Thus, participants perceived the two influencers differed with respect to their number of followers. The participants correctly distinguished the high brand control condition ( $M = 5.14$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) from the low brand control condition ( $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ), significantly ( $F [1, 271] = 30.06$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, participants perceived the high brand control condition differently from the low brand control condition. In addition, their advertising recognition was high ( $M = 6.28$ ,  $SD = 1.041$ ).

Consistent with H1a, two-way ANOVA indicated a significant main effect of brand control on influencer avoidance—that is, influencer avoidance behavior increased as brand control increased ( $M_{\text{high}} = 4.33$ ,  $M_{\text{low}} = 3.81$ ,  $F[1, 271] = 9.601$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). Moreover, we found an insignificant main effect of influencer type on influencer avoidance ( $M_{\text{macro}} = 4.22$ ,  $M_{\text{micro}} = 3.91$ ;  $F[1, 271] = 3.231$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ,  $p = 0.073$ ). In accordance with H2a, a two-way ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect of brand control and influencer type on influencer avoidance ( $F[1, 271] = 7.149$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ; see Figure 7). We found that people are more likely to punish high brand control by avoiding an influencer if the influencer is a macro rather than micro influencer. The control variable of advertising recognition ( $F[1, 271] = 1.378$ ,  $p < 0.1$ ,  $p = 0.242$ ) had an insignificant effect on influencer avoidance.

We further examined the mediation effects by employing the PROCESS macro (model 4) in SPSS (Hayes, 2018). The mediation model was estimated using 10,000 bootstrap samples with a 95% confidence interval (CI) (Hayes, 2018). We treated brand control as the independent variable, moral emotions as the mediating variable, and influencer avoidance as the dependent variable. The results indicated that the direct effect ( $b = 0.3588$ , standard error [SE] = 0.1582, 95% CI = [0.0472–0.6703]) and indirect effect ( $b = 0.1475$ , SE = 0.0731, 95% CI = [0.0115–0.2947]) of brand control on influencer avoidance via moral emotions was significant. Thus, hypothesis H4a is supported. Furthermore, to test the moderated mediation relationship, we ran Model 8 in the PROCESS macro based on 5000

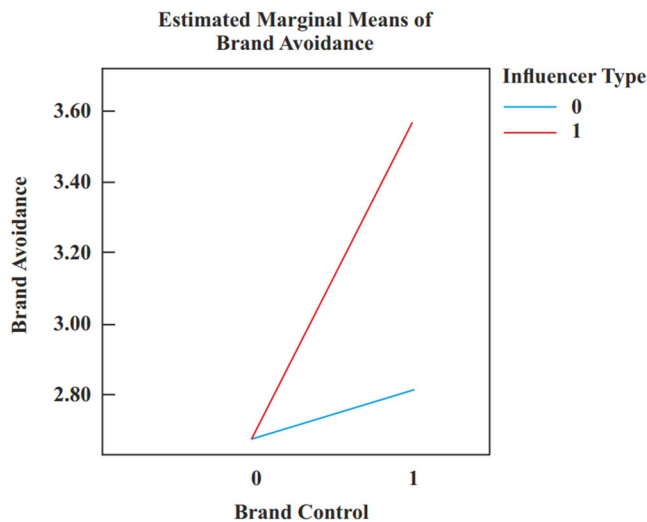


**FIGURE 7** Moderating effect of influencer type – micro influencer (0) and macro influencer (1) in the relationship between Brand Control and Influencer Avoidance.

samples (Hayes, 2018). The results revealed that influencer type moderated the direct effect of brand control on influencer avoidance ( $b = 0.8977$ , SE = 0.3080, 95% CI = [0.2912–1.5042]; see Figure 7). However, the moderated mediation effect of brand control on influencer avoidance via negative moral emotions (index of moderated mediation =  $-0.0094$ , 95% CI = [ $-0.2929$  to  $0.2576$ ]) was insignificant.

Consistent with H1b, two-way ANOVA indicated a significant main effect of brand control on brand avoidance—that is, brand avoidance behavior increased as brand control increased ( $M_{\text{high}} = 3.16$ ,  $M_{\text{low}} = 2.69$ ,  $F[1, 271] = 10.896$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). Moreover, we found a significant main effect of influencer type on brand avoidance ( $M_{\text{macro}} = 3.110$ ,  $M_{\text{micro}} = 2.747$ ,  $F [1, 271] = 6.420$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ). In accordance with H2b, two-way ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect of brand control and influencer type on brand avoidance ( $F[1, 271] = 5.598$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $p = 0.019$ ; see Figure 8). We found that people are more likely to punish brands endorsed by macro rather than micro influencers by avoiding them in a high brand control scenario (Figure 8).

We further examined the mediation effects by employing model 4 in the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018). The mediation model was estimated using 10,000 bootstrap samples with a 95% confidence interval (Hayes, 2018). Brand control was treated as the independent variable, moral emotions as the mediating variable, and brand avoidance as the dependent variable. The results indicated that the direct ( $b = 0.3807$ , SE = 0.1388, 95% CI = [0.1074–0.6539]) and indirect ( $b = 0.1099$ , SE = 0.0557, 95% CI = [0.0118, 0.2250]) effect of brand control on brand avoidance via moral emotions was significant. Thus, hypothesis H4b is supported. Furthermore, to test the moderated mediation hypothesis, we ran model 8 in the PROCESS macro based on 5,000 samples (Hayes, 2018). The results revealed that influencer type moderated the direct effect of brand control on brand avoidance ( $b = 0.6667$ , SE = 0.2694, 95%



**FIGURE 8** Moderating effect of influencer type – micro influencer (0) and macro influencer (1) in the relationship between Brand Control and Brand Avoidance.

CI = [0.1362–1.1971]). However, the moderated mediation effect of brand control on brand avoidance via negative moral emotions (index of moderated mediation = 0.0118, 95% CI = [–0.1894 to 0.2207]) was not significant.

#### 4.4.4 | Discussion

In Study 4, we replicated the findings of Study 1 to demonstrate that brand control interacts with influencer type to affect influencer and brand avoidance behavior. The avoidance reactions to brand control are magnified to a greater degree in the case of macro than micro influencers. In addition, the study replicated the findings of Study 3 to demonstrate that the negative moral emotion of anger mediates the relationship between brand control and influencer avoidance, as well as between brand control and brand avoidance. The study controlled for advertising disclosure in both high and low brand control posts. Participants demonstrated high advertising recognition in both high and low brand control cases; however, we did not find any effect of advertising recognition on avoidance behavior.

We tested the effect of the moderated mediation of influencer type on the relationship between independent variable—brand control—and both consequent variables—influencer avoidance and brand avoidance—via the mediator of negative moral emotions. However, the results of the moderated mediation were insignificant. In other words, although influencer type affects the direct relationship between brand control and influencer avoidance, it does not moderate the indirect relationship between the two variables via the path of negative moral emotions. A possible reason for the insignificant moderated mediation results could be that anger is a strong emotional response against perceived brand control—that is, a moral transgression (Grappi et al., 2013; Xie & Bagozzi, 2019). When a negative emotion is evoked, it is often followed by coping

responses such as avoidance (Haidt, 2003) irrespective of influencer type (i.e., macro vs. micro). Stated differently, although Gen Z consumers expect macro influencers to be more responsible than micro influencers, it does not have a varying effect on the route from brand control to avoidance through the negative moral emotion of anger.

## 5 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

In this study, we introduced *influencer avoidance*, a novel construct, and examined whether brand control impacts influencer and brand avoidance. Study 1 showed that brand control influences brand and influencer avoidance, which studies 2, 3, and 4 also corroborated. Study 1 showed that Gen Z considers transgressions on the part of macro influencers to be more serious than those of micro influencers; hence, they penalize macro influencers more severely. Study 2 unexpectedly showed that Gen Zers are more likely to avoid influencers with whom they had a weak compared to strong relationship following a perceived moral transgression. This was contrary to our hypothesis, which had proposed that consumers are more (vs. less) likely to avoid influencers in a strong (vs. weak) relationship scenario. The findings also contradicted the extant literature, which stated that followers/consumers would feel a greater sense of betrayal when they had enjoyed a strong relationship with the influencer (e.g., Aggarwal, 2004; Ward & Ostrom, 2006) and, thus, would exhibit greater retaliatory behaviors, such as avoidance, in the case of perceived high brand control wherein they deem the influencer's opinions to have been biased.

Study 3 demonstrated that the negative moral emotion of anger mediates the relationship between brand control and avoidance behavior. Study 4 corroborated the findings of Study 1 (i.e., avoidance reactions to brand control are magnified to a greater degree in the case of macro influencers compared to micro influencers) and Study 3 (i.e., the negative moral emotion of anger mediates the relationship between brand control and influencer avoidance, as well as that between brand control and brand avoidance). Study 4, used a different brand, a different influencer, and a separate target group drawn from a different platform to re-examine the findings from studies 1 and 3. Advertising recognition was also included in Study 4 as a control variable; however, we did not find any significant effect of advertising recognition on avoidance behavior.

### 5.1 | Theoretical implications

First, we contribute to prior research by combining literature on influencer marketing, Gen Z consumer behavior and brand avoidance. Past research on influencer marketing has predominantly focused on either the impact of brands' control on posts or how influencers manage the same by examining simple disclosure strategies (e.g., Carr & Hayes, 2014). Similarly, the literature on brand avoidance has

focused primarily on products and services. In contrast, our research examines the effects of brand control on influencer and brand avoidance, as well as the boundary conditions under which brand control elicits negative reactions from Gen Z. In doing so, we contribute to the literature on influencer marketing (Vrontis et al., 2021), Gen Z's brand avoidance (Kavaliuskė & Simonavičiūtė, 2015; Kuanr et al., 2020), and the theory of moral responsibility (Eshleman, 2014).

Second, our results suggest that brand control fosters both influencer avoidance and brand avoidance. In other words, Gen Z penalizes both brands and influencers for acting irresponsibly (e.g., when influencers post messages at the behest of brands). This is because Gen Z consumers consider the act of surreptitiously pushing the agenda of brands for commercial gain insincere and immoral. Moreover, this runs contrary to their expectations of influencers, whom they had previously trusted and treated as honest content creators rather than covert developers of posts at the behest of brands. We argue and empirically validate, across four studies, that this discontentment is then channeled toward active resistance to both the influencers and the brands. Our findings add to the influencer marketing literature, which suggests that brand control over influencers engenders resistance toward such messages (e.g., Boerman, 2020).

Third, our results advance the current understanding of influencer type (i.e., macro vs. micro) and its influence on avoidance behavior. Gen Z expects more from macro than micro influencers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Accordingly, Gen Zers look for more credible opinions and recommendations from macro influencers than from micro influencers (Lou & Kim, 2019). Hence, when an influencer is considered irresponsible and transgressive for sharing a post controlled by a brand, macro influencers are penalized to a greater degree than micro influencers. This is consistent with the findings reported in the extant literature on brand avoidance, which suggests that large and well-known brands are penalized more in the case of transgressions (Lee et al., 2009).

Fourth, our findings, contrary to our expectations, reveal a small significant interaction effect of brand control and relationship strength on influencer avoidance but no interaction effect on brand avoidance. Stated differently, our research demonstrates that people are more likely to punish high brand control by avoiding an influencer if they have a low relationship strength with that influencer, a counterintuitive finding. A plausible explanation for this unexpected finding lies in the body of research related to parasocial relationships. The extant literature has revealed that a parasocial relationship exists between influencers and their followers, which is maximized due to perceived interactivity, immediacy, and intimacy on social media platforms (Abidin, 2015; Chung & Cho, 2017; Halder et al., 2021). Followers might be sympathetic toward influencers due to their relationship with them. Thus, the existence of a parasocial relationship between an influencer and their followers is a possible explanation for the rejection of H3a. This mirrors some previous findings from the field of endorsement and branding, which indicated that the relationship strength provides insurance against transgression by the brand and the influencer (Jin & Phua, 2014). Our research shows that relationship

strength suppresses the influence of brand control on influencer and brand avoidance, suggesting that reactions to brand control differ when paired with a strong (vs. weak) relationship.

Further, brand control elicits strong reactions in terms of avoidance behavior in the absence of a relationship. However, it has a less severe influence on avoidance behavior when followers enjoy a strong relationship with the influencer. We thus aver that, in the case of strong relationship ties—that is, a strong parasocial relationship between an influencer and their followers—the followers value the relationship more (i.e., through a greater perceived intimacy), which protects the influencer against perceived brand control. In other words, our findings demonstrate that relationship strength attenuates the influence of brand control on influencer avoidance. In the case of a low relationship strength—that is, a low parasocial relationship due to less perceived intimacy—the influencer has a higher level of blameworthiness, thereby increasing influencer avoidance behavior. These findings instantiate the complexity of the relationships that members of Gen Z maintain with influencers and the implications of this complexity.

Fifth, contrary to H3b, our findings reveal that relationship strength does not interact with brand control to affect brand avoidance behavior. Brands are not peers or fellow human beings; in contrast, influencers are (Jun & Yi, 2020). Influencers are expected to be authentic (Pöyry et al., 2019), whereas brands are normally considered commercial (Holt, 2002) and are expected to drive their commercial agenda. Gen Z is likely to remain indifferent to brands, which are inanimate and driven by commercial intent. Thus, Gen Zers tend to be closer to influencers, who are considered peers, and follow them for their expertise and credibility. However, when the trappings and temptations of financial gain threaten this relationship, it can foster remorse in consumers for following influencers. That is, Gen Z will resort to retribution when they suspect that influencers are giving up their creative control to brands and covertly pushing the agenda of brands. In contrast, because brands are already known to promote and advertise their products and services, they are not held accountable for encroaching upon the creative territory of influencers. It is expected of them; thus, they remain unscathed/unpunished, even when there is perceived brand control.

In sum, our research adds to the literature related to influencer marketing to Gen Z by explaining the underlying mechanisms through which consumers respond to the control of influencers by brands. Our findings also show that negative moral emotions have a direct impact on both influencer and brand avoidance; however, the correlations between anger and brand avoidance are higher than those between anger and influencer avoidance. This indicates that negative moral emotions are directed more strongly toward brands than they are toward influencers.

## 5.2 | Practical implications

The practice of influencer marketing is built on the premise that consumers respond positively and proactively to peer-to-peer

recommendations. Born from a need for a more relatable, personable approach to advertising, influencer marketing solves the modern problem that people no longer appreciate the aggressive, “in-your-face” promotions of yesteryear. However, some marketers still feel uncomfortable with the idea that there are no guarantees that an influencer will spread a brand's message as well as a commercially minded, trained employee would. From this fear is born a desire to take creative control over influencers' content. Specifically, brand marketers who have hard targets to meet and who are under pressure from stakeholders to hit campaign touchpoints are increasingly trying to control influencers and their recommendations. This reaction demonstrates how Gen Z considers succumbing to brand control and posting content that has been dictated by brands (and that does not align with the influencer's usual content) as tantamount to a moral violation. Consumers negatively react to such morally transgressive acts by showing their disapproval of both the brands and the influencers through avoidance.

The present research also offers insights into how brands can counteract avoidance behavior among Gen Z. First, brands should not exercise excessive control over influencers' posts while targeting Gen Z. Social media can facilitate interactions between brands and consumers; as such, brands should focus on cultivating a network based on creative and informal relationships. Brands must adapt their influencer marketing strategies for Gen Z by following this key insight from our research. Gen Z is more skeptical of covert advertising and aware of brand control over influencers and product-related content; therefore, brands must understand that both their credibility and that of the influencer comes before any commercial purpose. It is important to remember that influencers are content creators. In fact, many social media stars are now seeking to shed the title of “influencer” in favor of a more creative categorization, assuming titles such as “tastemaker” or “key opinion leader.” Therefore, while the overall purchase power of Gen Z is at the heart of its value to brands, influencers' artistry lies in how they appeal to and interact with their followers to drive advocacy; as a consequence, this is one area where marketers must take a step back.

Second, the results suggest that practitioners should carefully choose the type of social media influencers to endorse their products when they are seeking control of influencers' posts. This study shows that avoidance behavior is less pronounced in the case of micro influencers than it is with macro influencers. Thus, brands should pay less attention to the number of followers and, rather, focus more on the level of engagement influencers have with their audience. Moreover, micro influencers are often more affordable and accessible to brands than macro influencers.

Third, the results show that Gen Z tend to direct their deep anger towards the brands as well as the influencers when they perceive brands' behavior as morally transgressive; their anger is deeper towards the brands than the influencers. In other words, brands bear the brunt of consumers' anger, whereas influencers experience a certain amount of reprieve. Thus, brand managers should be careful while partnering with influencers and employing them to endorse

their products. Managers should take enough care to ensure that consumers do not perceive the brand-influencer partnership and their acts as transgressive. That is, brand managers should avoid controlling the influencers as this would foster consumers' anger towards the brands, which might cause more harm to the brands, as compared to the influencers.

## 6 | LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite its contributions, this study is not free from limitations. For manipulating brand control situations, the choice of a single Instagram post (promoting a single product) might have affected the results obtained. As such, future research could use multiple posts and/or social media platforms, establishing a comparison between the different samples and allowing for an analysis of whether differences arise depending upon the configuration of the posts or the influencers used.

Second, we have considered brand control as an antecedent to avoidance behavior. Future research could include other variables to broaden the scope of the proposed model. For example, an influencer's commercial orientation (Martínez-López et al., 2020), message-sidedness (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020), role of influencer-consumer personality/gender (in)congruity (Pradhan et al., 2017), followers' past negative experiences with an influencer (Olsen & Sandholmen, 2019), and negative electronic word of mouth (eWOM) about an influencer (Konstantopoulou et al., 2019) could be examined as possible antecedents of brand avoidance.

Third, we have only examined the mediating role of anger in the relationship between brand control and avoidance behavior. However, there are other possible mediators affecting this relationship, such as influencer trustworthiness and authenticity (Chapple & Cownie, 2017; Pöyry et al., 2019). Future studies could, therefore, examine the mediating effect of trustworthiness on the relationship between brand control and avoidance behavior. Likewise, future research should consider other mediating variables, such as attitude toward the influencer and brand (Xie & Bagozzi, 2019) and symbolic incongruity between the influencer and their followers (Hegner et al., 2017), in the relationship between brand control and Gen Z's avoidance behavior.

Fourth, we used an online data-collection platform to conduct this study. We acknowledge the possibility of demand effect in our studies. Future studies should, therefore, make use of field experiments, to minimize the impact of the demand effect.

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### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.



## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions. Data is available on reasonable request.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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