

The effects of influencer characteristics on brand trust, brand attachment, and brand loyalty among SNS sportswear consumers: Focusing on the MZ generation consumers



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ABSTRACT

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This study aimed to empirically investigate the effects of influencer characteristics on brand trust, attachment and loyalty among social networking service (SNS) sportswear consumers and provide baseline information for influencer marketing strategies for sportswear brands targeting Millennials and Generation Z (MZ Generation). We surveyed users exposed to influencer marketing by sportswear brands on SNS using convenience sampling. The collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis, reliability analysis, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis using SPSS 29.0. The results show that credibility and intimacy have a significant impact on brand trust, attachment and loyalty among influencer characteristics. Additionally, brand trust not only strengthens brand attachment but also contributes to higher brand loyalty. Furthermore, brand attachment plays a crucial role in solidifying brand loyalty highlighting the interconnectedness of these factors in shaping consumer behavior. These findings have strategic implications for sportswear brands looking to increase loyalty among MZ Generation consumers in the future by formulating effective social media influencer marketing strategies. Sportswear brands can tailor their influencer marketing approaches to better resonate with MZ Generation consumers on SNS, ultimately enhancing brand loyalty by leveraging these insights.

Contribution/ Originality: This study is distinctive in focusing on the MZ generation and analyzing influencer marketing's impact on sportswear consumers' brand trust, attachment and loyalty. This study emphasizes a targeted empirical approach for a specific generation and consumer group unlike previous research on general social media marketing.

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of Internet technology has led to the rise of social media platforms through which people share their thoughts, opinions and experiences. This has led to the growth of social networking services (SNS), which enable communication and information flow among social media users around the world.

As social networks continue to grow in popularity, marketing methods are targeting mediums that are easier, faster, and more accessible to consumers such as the Internet and smartphones. According to Statista [1] the number of SNS users worldwide is expected to increase from 4.26 billion in 2021 to approximately 6 billion in 2027, which suggests that SNS is not used for communication alone but can also be an important marketing tool.

Various companies now use it as a marketing medium with the increasing popularity of SNS. SNS marketing refers to the promotion of companies, brands, products, and services through various social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and X (previously known as Twitter) which is cheaper than traditional marketing mediums [2]. Given these advantages, companies use SNS marketing to maximize their advertising effectiveness especially by using SNS influencers. The global influencer market size was estimated to be \$16.4 billion in 2022 with significant potential for further growth [3]. This shows that influencers are a potent marketing tool and marketers are actively using influencers to advertise.

Influencers are individuals who have numerous subscribers or followers on social media platforms and exert considerable influence on their followers [4]. Influencers have a striking appearance or unique personality and a considerable effect on consumers' purchase decisions because of their expertise in various fields such as sports, politics, culture, gaming, beauty and fashion [5]. In other words, influencers' messages on social media have a considerable effect on consumers' behavioral intentions.

The sportswear industry is one such industry that uses famous sportspersons and sports influencers as models. For example, Arc'Teryx partnered with a popular influencer in an Instagram event to show how to pair an Arc'Teryx jacket with a matching outfit which drove its stock price from HKD (Hong Kong Dollar) 70 in 2020 to HKD (Hong Kong Dollar) 186.5 in 2021 [6]. Adidas featured several influencers in its 2021 Instagram reels campaign, #Open Forum which was viewed by 7.6 million users substantially increasing its brand visibility and awareness [7]. The growth of the sportswear market is notable because sportswear consumers are sportspersons as well as those who regularly exercise [8]. The global sportswear market is expected to be \$356 billion by 2032 growing at an average annual growth rate of 6.9% from 2023; this makes it a high-growth industry [9]. Influencer marketing in the sportswear market has a positive impact on the performance of companies. Practical considerations should be taken in this area considering the large potential of the sportswear market.

This study also focuses on MZ Generation consumers who are emerging as an influential demographic in the consumer market. The MZ Generation refers to the millennial (M) generation and Generation Z or those who were born between 1980 and the early 2000s, grew up in the digital and Internet eras and have a vastly different lifestyle than the preceding generations [10, 11]. The MZ Generation is quite comfortable communicating through SNS in their daily lives and actively uses SNS to drive consumption. Influencer marketing exploits the MZ Generation's tendency to imitate others through SNS influencers [12]. The MZ Generation is also more likely to pursue a healthy lifestyle and indulge in self-care through exercise which leads to an increased demand for sportswear [13]. Therefore, various sportswear brands use influencer marketing to attract MZ Generation consumers which is a new marketing strategy that resonates with the MZ Generation [14]. As the MZ Generation is currently a major consumer segment and expected to grow in size, it is necessary to predict and prepare for the future consumption trends led by the MZ Generation.

In this context, this study aims to understand the effects of influencer characteristics on brand trust, brand attachment and brand loyalty among SNS sportswear consumers by focusing on the MZ Generation. Studies have examined influencer characteristics in various fields such as fashion, beauty, sports and virtual reality but no study has investigated influencer marketing characteristics in the sportswear brand space. Furthermore, there are no studies on influencers focusing on the MZ Generation. The uniqueness of this study is that it focuses on a specific sector, sportswear brands and a specific generation, the MZ Generation. In addition, the variables of brand trust, brand attachment and brand loyalty used in this study are used to understand consumers' purchase intention and behavior and the specificity of this study was ensured through a review of previous studies.

Sportswear brands must formulate specific marketing strategies using influencers to reflect changes in their consumer base and marketing paradigm. It is also necessary to conduct research that reflects the demand of the MZ Generation who will become a major consumer demographic in the future.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to empirically analyze the effects of influencer characteristics on brand trust, brand attachment and brand loyalty and provide baseline information for creating marketing strategies for sportswear brands to attract MZ Generation consumers.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS SETTING

2.1. *The Relationship between Influencer Characteristics and Brand Trust*

Influencers are people with numerous social networking platforms who have considerable reach and influence [15]. Studies on influencers have identified different influencer characteristics. For example, Hong [16] identified credibility, expertise, intimacy and authenticity as influencer characteristics while Park and Chung [17] considered credibility, attractiveness, intimacy, and expertise to be influencer characteristics. We can categorize common influencer characteristics into credibility, expertise, and intimacy based on the findings of these studies. Credibility refers to the degree of trust and acceptance of a message from a source and is a psychological judgment that consumers make about the source [18]. Expertise refers to the degree to which consumers perceive an influencer to have specialized knowledge or the ability to provide accurate information [19]. Intimacy refers to the degree of familiarity or comfort they feel with a particular target [20]. We added informativeness as an influencer characteristic in this study because it involves providing information about sportswear products. Informativeness is defined as the ability to quickly provide information about new products or services to consumers [21]. According to Han [22] and Ma and Lee [23] it is an essential influencer characteristic. This study considered four influencer characteristics: credibility, expertise, intimacy and informativeness, all of which were organized into a single factor.

Brand trust is defined as a customer's belief that a brand will deliver the value and functionality they expect [24]. In other words, brand trust can be regarded as the feeling of safety derived by consumers from interacting with a brand. Indeed, companies must focus on brand trust because it creates a valuable exchange between a company and consumers [25]. In this study, we considered brand trust as a single item.

In the literature on brand trust based on influencer characteristics, Kim et al. [26] showed that brand trust is essential to explain how influencer characteristics are related to brands. Matin et al. [27] showed that influencer characteristics positively influence trust in brands. Kolarova [28] showed that influencer characteristics play a mediating role in increasing brand trust. We propose the following hypothesis based on these studies:

H₁: Influencer characteristics have a positive impact on brand trust.

2.2. *The Relationship between Influencer Characteristics and Brand Attachment*

Brand attachment is defined as the emotional bond and sense of security that develop between a consumer and a brand [29]. It has been shown to be a significant predictor of positive attitudinal change between consumers and brands. Brand attachment is purely emotional in the sense that consumers interact with a brand to form an emotionally intimate relationship with it. Thus, companies must focus on building an emotional connection with consumers [30]. In other words, the positive emotions generated through brand attachment are important because they play an important role in strengthening the connection to the brand. In this study, we analyzed brand attachment as a single item.

In studies on brand attachment based on influencer characteristics, Kim [31] found that three influencer characteristics, namely, credibility, expertise, and intimacy had a significant impact on brand attachment. Chen and Lu [32] found that influencer characteristics play an important role in brand attachment and followers' purchase intentions and that influencers build attachment through their interactions with followers. We propose the following hypothesis based on these studies:

H₂: Influencer characteristics have a positive impact on brand attachment.

2.3. The Relationship between Influencer Characteristics and Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is the tendency of a consumer to consistently purchase a particular brand [33]. In marketing, brand loyalty is interpreted as the degree of attachment of a consumer to a particular brand. A brand can secure a stable customer base and effectively defend against new competing brands when consumers are highly loyal to a brand [34]. Brand loyalty is fundamental to generating long-term profits for companies [35]. It is important to empirically analyze how influencer marketing affects brand loyalty in today's rapidly changing marketing environment. In this study, we analyzed brand loyalty as a single item.

In studies on influencer characteristics and brand loyalty, Hugh Wilkie et al. [36] showed that positive perceptions of influencer characteristics lead to brand trust and brand loyalty. Yu et al. [37] showed that influencer characteristics positively affect the ego connection between consumers and brands which leads to brand loyalty. Furthermore, Do [38] showed that influencer characteristics affect consumers' brand switching which affects brand loyalty. We propose the following hypothesis based on these studies:

H₃: Influencer characteristics have a positive impact on brand loyalty.

2.4. The Relationship between Brand Trust and Brand Loyalty

In studies on brand trust and brand loyalty, Liang [39] found that trust in a brand triggers positive emotions, which leads to brand loyalty, increased repeat purchases, and a positive word-of-mouth effect. Similarly, Cardoso et al. [40] highlighted the importance of brand trust in fostering customer loyalty and contributing to the development of long-term relationships with the brand. Akoglu and Özbek [41] further emphasized that brand trust is an important antecedent of brand loyalty with higher brand trust leading to greater loyalty to the brand. Brand trust has become an important factor in improving consumer loyalty and strengthening relationships in an increasingly competitive environment. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₄: Brand trust has a positive impact on brand loyalty.

2.5. The Relationship between Brand Attachment and Brand Loyalty

In studies on brand attachment and brand loyalty, Shimul [42] showed that brand attachment creates a psychological connection between consumers and a brand which leads to brand loyalty. Ghorbanzadeh and Rahehagh [43] showed that brand attachment plays an important role in the transition from brand satisfaction to brand loyalty. Brand attachment has been shown to be linked with consumers' emotional connection to a brand, which strengthens brand loyalty. Li et al. [44] showed that brand attachment plays an important role in building brand loyalty through customer engagement. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₅: Brand attachment has a positive impact on brand loyalty.

2.6. The Relationship between Brand Trust and Brand Attachment

In studies on brand trust and brand attachment, Kim and Chao [45] found that brand trust is a key factor in forming brand attachment. Shimul [42] highlighted its significant role in building attachment particularly among younger consumers. Furthermore, Huaman-Ramirez and Merunka [46] found that brand trust plays a mediating role in shaping brand attachment through brand experience. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₆: Brand trust has a positive impact on brand attachment.

2.7. Research Model

In this study, we developed six hypotheses based on the literature. This research model categorizes influencers into four subcategories and assesses their specific effects on brand trust, attachment, and loyalty distinguishing it from existing studies. Furthermore, this study not only examines the respective impacts of brand trust and brand

attachment on brand loyalty but also integrates the influence of brand trust on brand attachment within a single research framework setting it apart from previous research. Figure 1 presents the research model for this study.

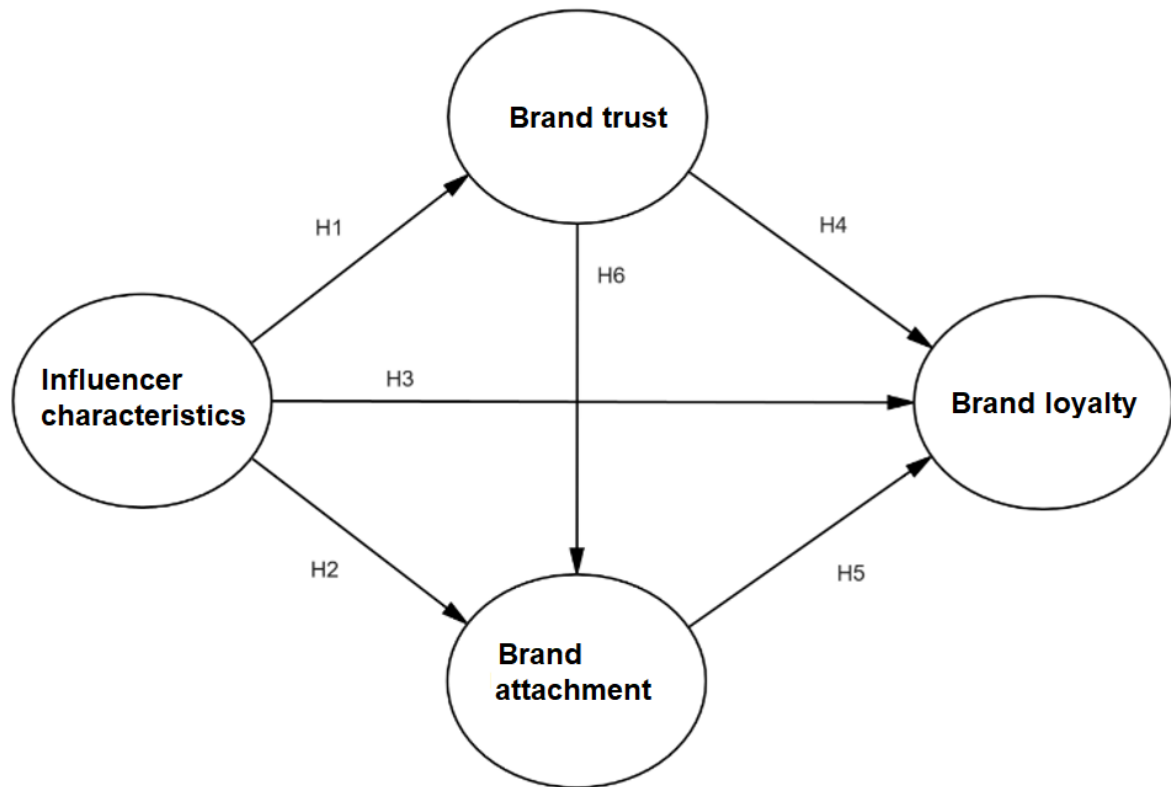


Figure 1. Research model.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1. Research Subjects

We selected MZ Generation consumers who have been exposed to influencer marketing by sportswear brands on SNS as the research subjects to examine the effects of influencer characteristics on brand trust, brand attachment, and brand loyalty of SNS sportswear consumers with a focus on the MZ Generation. We used convenience sampling and the survey responses were self-reported. Out of a total of 230 questionnaires, 220 were used for the final analysis and 10 questionnaires that were deemed incomplete or unreliable were excluded. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants.

Classification	Participants	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	112	50.8
	Female	108	49.1
Age	20s	130	59.1
	30s	90	40.9
Average daily time spent on social media	Less than 30 minutes.	16	7.3
	30 minutes or more but less than 1 hour.	62	28.2
	More than 1 hour but less than 2 hours.	100	45.5
	More than 2 hours but less than 3 hours.	37	16.8
	More than 3 hours.	5	2.3
Total		220	100

3.2. Research Instruments

In this study, we used a questionnaire as the measurement tool. All of the questions were measured on a 5-point Likert scale except questions related to the participants' demographic characteristics. Appendix 1 provides a detailed list of the questionnaire items used in this study.

The questionnaire contained 12 questions with 4 questions on each factor of influencer characteristics. "Expertise" was measured by modifying and supplementing the questionnaire of Nam and Lee [47] which was a modification of the questionnaire used in previous studies [48, 49]. "Credibility" was measured by modifying and supplementing the questionnaire of Park and Chung [17] which was a modification of the questionnaire used in previous studies [50, 51]. "Intimacy" was measured by modifying and supplementing the questionnaire of Park and Chung [17], which was a modification of the questionnaire used in previous studies [50, 52]. "Informativeness" was measured by modifying and supplementing the questionnaire used in previous studies to suit the purpose of this study [21, 22]. The brand trust factor was a four-item questionnaire modified and supplemented from Ahn et al. [53] to suit the purpose of this study. The brand attachment factor was a four-item questionnaire modified and supplemented from Bae et al. [54] which was based on the questionnaire used in previous studies [29]. Finally, the brand loyalty factor was a four-item questionnaire modified and supplemented from the questionnaire of Bae et al. [54] which was based on the questionnaire used in previous studies [24].

We conducted exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Table 2 presents the reliability test results. In the EFA, we used principal components analysis for factor extraction and varimax for factor rotation to evaluate item validity, using an eigenvalue of 1.0 or higher and a factor loading of .5 or more. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was .867 which indicates the goodness-of-fit of the sample. Bartlett's test of sphericity yielded an approximate chi-square of 6688.282 ($p < .001$) indicating a good fit for the factor analysis and confirming its appropriateness. Seven factors were extracted with all items having factor loadings above .5 confirming their validity. The reliability analysis yielded Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .932-.964, all of which were higher than the threshold of .70 suggested by Nunnally and Bernstein [55] thus indicating the reliability of the items used for each factor.

Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis and reliability validation.

Factors	Measurement items	Loadings	α
Influencer characteristics (Intimacy)	4. I am friendly with the influencer.	0.908	0.964
	2. I feel intimate with the influencer.	0.907	
	3. I am comfortable with the influencer.	0.882	
	1. I do not find the influencer unfamiliar.	0.861	
Influencer characteristics (Expertise)	3. The influencer seems to take pride in his or her work.	0.929	0.948
	1. The influencer is good at creating content.	0.918	
	4. The influencer seems to be striving to attain expertise.	0.905	
	2. The influencer is knowledgeable in their field.	0.887	
Brand trust	4. I believe the brand that the influencer is promoting is honest.	0.901	0.949
	1. I trust the brand that the influencer is promoting.	0.885	
	3. I think the brand that the influencer is promoting is safe.	0.881	
	4. I rely on the brand that the influencer is promoting.	0.789	
Brand loyalty	3. I tend to stick to the brand that the influencer is promoting.	0.887	0.940
	1. I will repurchase the brand that the influencer is promoting.	0.880	
	2. I will continue to purchase from the brand that the influencer is promoting.	0.879	
	4. I will purchase from the brand that the influencer is promoting, even if I have to pay a higher price than for other brands.	0.862	
Brand attachment	2. I am passionate about the brand that the influencer is promoting.	0.890	0.937
	4. The brand that the influencer is promoting fascinates me.	0.865	
	1. I am comfortable with the brand that the influencer is promoting.	0.852	
	3. I have a deep relationship with the brand that the	0.850	

Factors	Measurement items	Loadings	α
	influencer is promoting.		
Influencer characteristics (Informativeness)	1. The influencer provides the latest information.	0.921	0.932
	2. The influencer regularly updates various types of information.	0.897	
	3. The influencer provides trending information.	0.883	
	4. I get information quickly through the influencer.	0.860	
Influencer characteristics (Credibility)	2. I feel that the influencer provides genuine content and posts.	0.846	0.933
	1. The content and posts of that influencer resonate with me.	0.843	
	3. The influencer shares and delivers content and post details with honesty.	0.842	
	4. I trust the content and posts of the influencer.	0.788	

3.3. Data Processing Method

We analyzed the data collected using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 29.0. First, we used frequency analysis to determine the general characteristics of the participants and descriptive statistical analysis to assess the statistical significance of each variable. Secondly, we employed reliability analysis, using Cronbach's alpha to test the internal consistency of the measured variables. Third, we used EFA to verify the validity of the measurement variables. Fourth, we used Pearson's correlation analysis to determine the correlation between variables. Fifth, we used multiple regression analysis to test the causal relationship between the variables. All of the statistical significance levels were tested at $\alpha = 0.05$.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Descriptive statistics and correlation analyses were conducted to determine the basic statistics of the variables used in this study as well as to examine the correlation and multicollinearity among the variables. Table 3 displays these results. The descriptive statistics showed that the means ranged from 4.21–4.51 with a standard deviation of .602–.705. Additionally, the absolute value of skewness was less than 3.0 and the absolute value of kurtosis was less than 10.0 indicating that the distribution of the variables meets the assumption of normality.

The results of the correlation analysis showed that all of the variables are significantly correlated by definition except the correlation between expertise and informativeness and between expertise and brand loyalty. The correlation coefficients between the variables ranged from .073–.739 and were all below .80 indicating that multicollinearity was not an issue.

Table 3. Correlation analysis among study variables.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Expertise	1						
Credibility	0.356**	1					
Intimacy	0.222**	0.465**	1				
Informativeness	0.105	0.288**	0.299**	1			
Brand trust	0.259**	0.440**	0.404**	0.184**	1		
Brand attachment	0.195**	0.411**	0.377**	0.264**	0.401**	1	
Brand loyalty	0.073	0.370**	0.320**	0.174**	0.430**	0.342**	1
M	4.44	4.51	4.39	4.45	4.43	4.21	4.28
Sd	0.705	0.612	0.658	0.634	0.602	0.643	0.664
Skewness	-1.033	-1.132	-0.673	-0.973	-0.862	-0.501	-0.621
Kurtosis	-0.372	0.190	-0.713	-0.183	-0.147	-0.796	-0.781

Note: **p<.01.

4.2. Hypothesis Testing

Table 4 presents the results of the regression analysis of the effects of SNS influencer characteristics on brand trust. Influencer characteristics had a significant impact on brand trust. Influencer characteristics were found to have 25.3% explanatory power for the total variance in brand trust and credibility and intimacy had a positive impact on brand trust. Thus, hypothesis 1 was supported.

Table 4. Impact of influencer characteristics on brand trust (N=220).

Variables	Brand trust		
	B	SE B	β
Expertise	0.087	0.054	0.102
Credibility	0.281	0.070	0.286***
Intimacy	0.222	0.062	0.243***
Informativeness	0.017	0.060	0.018
R^2	0.253		
F	18.239		

Note: ***p<0.01.

Table 5 presents the regression analysis results of the effects of SNS influencer characteristics on brand attachment. We found that influencer characteristics had a significant impact on brand attachment. Influencer characteristics were found to have 22.7% explanatory power for the total variance in brand attachment, with credibility and intimacy having a positive impact on brand attachment. Thus, hypothesis 2 was supported.

Table 5. Impact of influencer characteristics on brand attachment (N=220).

Variables	Brand attachment		
	B	SE B	B
Expertise	0.038	0.059	0.041
Credibility	0.278	0.076	0.264***
Intimacy	0.204	0.068	0.208**
Informativeness	0.123	0.065	0.121
R^2	0.227		
F	15.799		

Note: **p<0.01, ***p<.001.

Table 6 presents the regression analysis results of the effects of SNS influencer characteristics on brand loyalty. We found that influencer characteristics had a statistically significant impact on brand loyalty. Influencer characteristics were found to have an explanatory power of 17.2% of the total variance in brand loyalty with credibility and intimacy having a positive impact on brand loyalty. Thus, hypothesis 3 was supported.

Table 6. Impact of influencer characteristics on brand loyalty (N=220).

Variables	Brand loyalty		
	B	SE B	β
Expertise	-0.075	0.063	-0.079
Credibility	0.326	0.081	0.301***
Intimacy	0.188	0.072	0.186*
Informativeness	0.042	0.069	0.040
R^2	0.172		
F	11.152		

Note: *p<0.05, ***p<0.001.

Table 7 presents the results of the regression analysis of the impact of brand trust on brand loyalty. Brand trust was found to have a statistically significant impact on brand loyalty with an explanatory power of 18.5% for the total variance in brand loyalty. Based on these results, it can be concluded that hypothesis 4 was supported.

Table 7. Impact of brand trust on brand loyalty (N=220).

Variables	Brand loyalty		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
(Constant)	2.179	0.301	
Brand trust	0.474	0.067	0.430***
<i>R</i> ²	0.185		
<i>F</i>	49.398		

Note: ***p<.001.

Table 8 presents the results of the regression analysis of the impact of brand attachment on brand loyalty. Brand attachment was found to have a statistically significant impact on brand loyalty with an explanatory power of 11.7% for the total variance in brand loyalty. Thus, hypothesis 5 was supported.

Table 8. Impact of brand attachment on brand loyalty (N=220).

Variables	Brand loyalty		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
(Constant)	2.792	0.280	
Brand attachment	0.353	0.066	0.342***
<i>R</i> ²	0.117		
<i>F</i>	28.912		

Note: ***p<0.001.

Table 9 presents the results of the regression analysis of the impact of brand trust on brand attachment. Brand trust was found to have a statistically significant impact on brand attachment with an explanatory power of 16.1% for the total variation in brand attachment. Thus, hypothesis 6 was also supported.

Table 9. Impact of brand trust on brand attachment (N=220).

Variables	Brand attachment		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
(Constant)	2.308	0.296	
Brand trust	0.429	0.066	0.401***
<i>R</i> ²	0.161		
<i>F</i>	41.834		

Note: ***p<0.001.

5. DISCUSSION

In this study, we empirically analyzed the effects of influencer characteristics, brand trust, brand attachment, and brand loyalty on MZ Generation consumers who have been exposed to social media influencer marketing by sportswear brands.

The results of this study indicate that among the characteristics of influencers, professionalism and informativeness, excluding trustworthiness and intimacy, do not have an impact on brand trust, brand attachment, or brand loyalty. However, this finding contrasts with the results of previous studies [56-58]. This discrepancy can be attributed to the fact that the earlier studies were conducted on the entire user population without distinguishing the specific cohort of Generation MZ as was done in this research. It can be observed in this study that Generation MZ tends to place more trust in influencers who are perceived as having a lower psychological distance and greater authenticity rather than being focused solely on the amount of information or the professionalism of the influencer [59]. This represents a significant difference from previous research and can be identified as one of the key implications of the study.

The specific discussions of this study are as follows: First, among influencer characteristics, credibility and intimacy were found to have a positive impact on brand trust. This finding was consistent with that of Joshi et al.

[60] who showed that trust in influencers leads to trust in the brands they promote, and that of Liu and Zheng [61] who found that trustworthy influencers foster higher brand trust and consumer engagement. It is also highly correlated with the finding of Kim et al. [26] who showed that influencer intimacy is an important factor in shaping followers' brand trust and brand identification.

Second, credibility and intimacy were found to have a positive impact on brand attachment with credibility having a greater influence than intimacy among influencer characteristics. This finding is similar to that of Schneewind and Sharkasi [62] who showed that influencers with a high brand fit have higher credibility leading consumers to feel a stronger attachment with the brand, and that of Kim and Kim [63] who showed that influencer credibility and social media presence play an important role in increasing followers' brand attachment. This finding can also be interpreted in a similar way as the finding of Jun and Yi [64] who showed that interaction or intimacy with influencers increased followers' emotional attachment. Kim [31] found that credibility and intimacy among influencer characteristics had a significant impact on attachment.

Third, credibility and intimacy were found to have a positive impact on brand loyalty with credibility having a greater influence than intimacy among influencer characteristics. This finding is partially consistent with that of Lacap et al. [65] who found that frequent interaction between an influencer's credibility and self-disclosure promotes positive attitudes toward brands, and that of Argyris et al. [66] who found that brand managers can increase brand loyalty by demonstrating intimacy with influencers. This finding is similar to that of Kim [31] who found that influencer credibility and intimacy increased consumer attachment leading to brand loyalty.

We confirmed that when MZ Generation consumers engage with influencers, they need to first develop a relationship of trust with the influencer and maintain intimacy so that the influencer does not feel distant. This leads to brand trust, brand attachment, and brand loyalty. More importantly, MZ Generation consumers prefer influencers they know and are familiar with rather than being overwhelmed with information by sportswear brands [67, 68] suggesting that influencers, and not sports experts have a greater impact on brand loyalty. Sportswear brands must formulate strategies to maintain transparency when marketing with influencers on SNS to increase the credibility of influencers. First, sportswear brands should carefully conduct a background check on an influencer's personal life before deciding whether to use that influencer for marketing. If issues are uncovered later, consumer trust in the influencer will be irreparably damaged, so it is important to screen them upfront [36]. Second, brands must ensure that an influencer is being transparent with their followers by clearly labeling sponsored or advertised content. Sportswear brands must notify influencers about issues related to unlabeled ads in which an influencer advertises a product as if it was their own even though the influencer was paid by the brand, as this may result in negative publicity [69]. Third, sportswear brands should offer sponsorships and support that allow influencers to use branded products themselves so that they can share their personal experiences with consumers. This approach allows influencers to share the positive aspects of a product and suggest areas of improvement which is believed to increase consumers' trust in the influencer and lead to brand trust [70].

Moreover, sportswear brands need to actively leverage influencers who are highly intimate with the MZ Generation in their marketing. Brands must actively engage influencers who frequently organize live events for their subscribers. It is also important to use influencers who are proficient at connecting with fans and consumers at brand events and festivals. These influencers can be of great assistance in increasing the brand's presence while helping build brand intimacy through direct interaction with consumers. This strategy can simultaneously raise the awareness of the influencer and the brand and create a natural imprint on MZ Generation consumers.

Fourth, brand trust has a positive impact on brand loyalty. These results are consistent with those of previous studies Lou and Yuan [71] and Haenlein et al. [72] that showed a positive relationship between brand trust and brand loyalty. Thus, sportswear brands must use strategic measures to build brand trust to increase consumers' brand loyalty. Sportswear brands can expect to build trust through long-term partnerships with influencers and increase brand credibility by encouraging influencers to share honest reviews and experiences using real products.

Fifth, brand attachment has a positive impact on brand loyalty. These findings are consistent with those of previous studies by Mensah and Brew [73] and Goi et al. [74] that showed a positive relationship between brand attachment and brand loyalty. This suggests that sportswear brands need a strategy to strengthen brand attachment to increase consumers' brand loyalty. Therefore, sportswear brands should actively use influencers who interact frequently with consumers through regular live broadcasts to explore brands which will increase consumers' interest and lead to brand attachment [75]. Additionally, it is important to engage with MZ Generation consumers by participating in post-purchase special events and occasions. This approach will help strengthen relationships with consumers and increase brand attachment and loyalty [76]. In addition, influencers may improve their relationships with consumers strengthening brand loyalty by organizing activities or events in which customers may directly engage.

Sixth, brand trust has a positive impact on brand attachment. These findings are in line with those of previous studies. Dapena-Baron et al. [77] and Hongsuchon et al. [78] showed a positive relationship between brand trust and brand attachment. This suggests that brand trust has a mutually reinforcing relationship with brand attachment. In other words, as brand trust increases, consumers connect more deeply with a brand, which is more likely to lead to purchase intention [79]. Thus, sportswear brands should consider implementing a system that allows consumers to provide real-time feedback on products and services as this will strengthen communication with consumers and give them confidence that the brand pays attention to their opinion to strengthen and sustain the relationship between consumers and brands. In addition, building a brand community with influencers and providing a variety of content such as target-driven events and activities for consumers to participate in will be effective in strengthening both brand trust and brand attachment.

6. CONCLUSION

This study analyzes the impact of influencer characteristics on brand trust, brand attachment, and brand loyalty confirming that both trustworthiness and intimacy have positive effects with trustworthiness exhibiting a relatively stronger influence. Additionally, it reveals that brand trust is a key factor in enhancing brand attachment and brand loyalty while brand attachment also positively influences brand loyalty. These findings suggest that sportswear brands can establish trust and intimacy with consumers through influencer marketing, thereby increasing brand attachment and loyalty. In particular, MZ generation consumers value relationships with trustworthy and intimate influencers which can ultimately lead to brand loyalty. Accordingly, sportswear brands should consider specific marketing strategies such as a strategy to enhance the transparency of influencers which is necessary to increase their trustworthiness. Brands should meticulously review influencers' personal lives and ethical issues in advance and ensure that sponsorship content is clearly indicated to maintain consumer trust. Second, it is important for influencers to directly use brand products and share authentic experiences to strengthen trust with consumers. Third, marketing strategies utilizing regular live broadcasts or communication events with fans should be implemented to maintain intimacy between consumers and influencers. These strategies are expected to contribute to the simultaneous enhancement of brand trust, attachment, and loyalty.

In this way, this study is important as it analyzed the impact of influencer characteristics on brand trust, brand attachment, and brand loyalty which has several implications for the development of new marketing strategies for sportswear brands that are focused on a specific generation. However, this study has the following limitations which provide opportunities for future studies to explore:

First, this study did not focus on a specific social media platform; rather it examined social media platforms in general. However, it is necessary to develop an appropriate marketing strategy for individual platforms as each social media platform has different user characteristics, features, marketing effectiveness, and competitive environment. Future studies could separately examine social media platforms which may provide more specific marketing strategies for individual social media platforms.

Second, this study did not categorize influencers separately as it focused on influencer marketing as used by sportswear brands. Today, there is a shift away from celebrity influencers toward “regular” influencers. Therefore, it is necessary to refine the scope of influencers by providing criteria for selecting influencers in a follow-up study. Furthermore, it will be helpful to formulate strategic marketing plans to understand the extent of influencer collaboration and utilization according to the type of influencer by categorizing and comparing influencers.

Last, this study did not test for mediating effects because its focus was identifying the relationships among the variables. There are no studies on the topic, mediating effects can be verified if the relevance of two variables is mentioned which can provide a deeper understanding beyond a simple causal relationship. Therefore, it is suggested that follow-up studies should test the mediating effects of brand trust and brand attachment on the relationship between influencer characteristics and brand loyalty which will allow for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of influencer marketing.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1. List of survey items.

Items	Measurement items	References
Expertise	1. The influencer creates content effectively.	Nam and Lee [47]
	2. The influencer possesses extensive knowledge in their field.	
	3. The influencer appears to take pride in their work.	
	4. The influencer seems to strive for expertise.	
Credibility	1. I resonate with the content and posts provided by the influencer.	Park and Chung [17]
	2. I can feel the sincerity in the content and posts shared by the influencer.	
	3. The influencer shares and communicates the content and posts honestly.	
	4. The content and posts provided by the influencer can be trusted.	
Intimacy	1. The influencer does not seem unfamiliar.	Park and Chung [17]
	2. The influencer feels approachable.	
	3. The influencer exudes a sense of comfort.	
	4. The influencer conveys a sense of friendliness.	
Informativeness	1. The influencer provides the latest information.	Han [21] and Han [22]
	2. The influencer continuously updates diverse information.	
	3. I access information rapidly through the influencer.	
	4. The influencer offers trending information.	
Brand trust	1. I trust the brand promoted by the influencer.	Ahn, et al. [53]
	2. I rely on the brand promoted by the influencer.	
	3. I believe the brand promoted by the influencer is safe.	
	4. I believe the brand promoted by the influencer is honest.	
Brand attachment	1. I find the brand promoted by the influencer comfortable.	Bae, et al. [54]
	2. I am passionate about the brand promoted by the influencer.	
	3. I have a deep connection with the brand promoted by the influencer.	
	4. The brand promoted by the influencer captivates me.	
Brand loyalty	1. I will repurchase the brand promoted by the influencer.	Bae, et al. [54]
	2. I will continue to buy the brand promoted by the influencer.	
	3. I tend to stick with the brand promoted by the influencer.	
	4. I would pay a higher price for the brand promoted by the influencer compared to other brands.	

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