

**The Deinfluencing Paradox: When Anti-Consumption Becomes a Marketing Strategy in Toronto's
Direct-to-Consumer Brand Landscape**

Laidlaw Scholars Programme - Research Proposal

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Introduction

In January 2023, TikTok's #deinfluencing trend accumulated over 1.5 billion views as creators discouraged purchasing viral products and called out overconsumption. Deinfluencing is understood as a grassroots rejection of consumer capitalism among Gen Z facing climate anxiety and economic precarity. By mid-2023, brands had pivoted in response to the trend. They began hiring influencers to run deinfluencing campaigns. Those profiting from consumerism were now monetizing anti-consumerism.

My work on CSR campaigns, including sustainability initiatives with Panasonic, taught me how brands systematically commodify such messaging. There is a real political desire at the heart of deinfluencing: many young people want to consume ethically but struggle to distinguish authentic guidance from sophisticated marketing. This professional experience sparked an academic question: how has the anti-consumption movement of the early 2020s been absorbed by the very marketing system it sought to critique?

Literature Review & Key Intervention

TikTok's algorithm appears to reward deinfluencing content, with the #deinfluencing hashtag reaching over 450 million views by early 2024 (Netinfluencer, 2024), creating incentives for brands and creators to co-opt the aesthetic. Researchers have documented deinfluencing as a content and audience phenomenon (Bainotti, 2023; Michaelidou et al., 2025; Koivunen et al., 2025). In particular, they have documented how authenticity operates as economic currency for creators (Hund, 2023) and how structural inequalities shape creator labor (Glatt, 2024; Lee & Abidin, 2021). However, no study has investigated whether and how brands (A) strategically commission deinfluencing content, (B) and where brand intent diverges from creator interpretation. My proposed project addresses these gaps through a stakeholder analysis, interviewing brand managers to reveal the production mechanisms where anti-consumption becomes a marketing strategy.

Research Objectives and Questions

Primary Objective:

To investigate how Canadian D2C brands understand and negotiate deinfluencing partnerships, and where brand strategic intent diverges from creator interpretation.

Secondary Objectives:

1. To analyze the evolution of deinfluencing from grassroots movement to commodified trend.
2. To create ethical guidelines for brands seeking authentic sustainability engagement via deinfluencing

Research Questions:

- How have Toronto's D2C brands incorporated deinfluencing aesthetics into marketing strategies?
- What do the identified divergences reveal about the commodification of anti-consumption movements?

Methodology

This qualitative study combines stakeholder interviews, and content analysis. Research will be conducted over 6 weeks in Toronto under supervision of Professor Dan Guadagnolo, University of Toronto.

Phase 1: Brand Interviews (Weeks 1-4)

Semi-structured 45-60 minute interviews with 6 marketing leaders from Toronto's D2C brands (Mejuri, 437, Endy, Knix, Kotn, Duer) exploring:

- Awareness of deinfluencing and strategic use of anti-consumption aesthetics
- Campaign briefs and creator partnership practices
- Definitions of authenticity and ethical boundaries
- Perceived ROI and success metrics for deinfluencing campaigns

Phase 2: Discourse Analysis (Week 5)

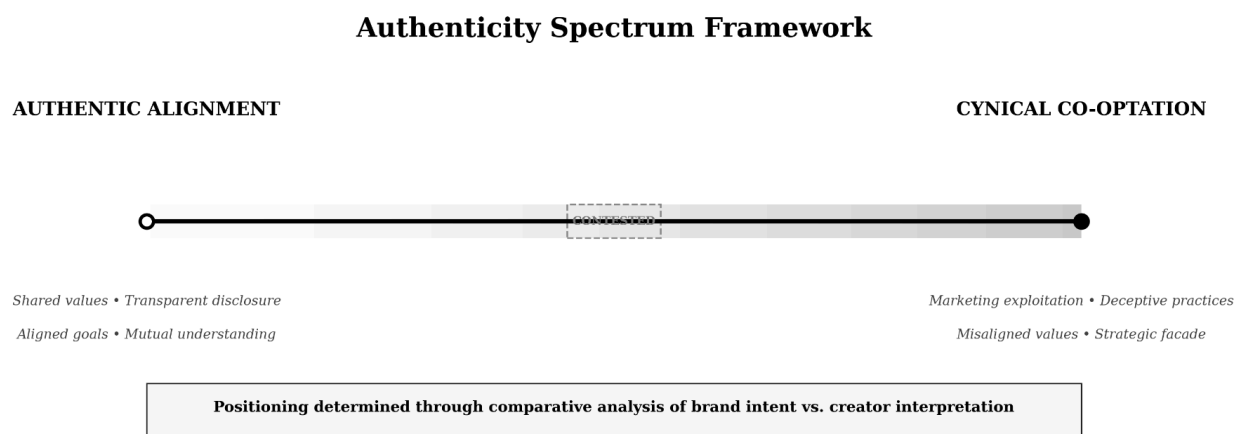
Interview transcripts from brands will be analysed to identify:

- Points of alignment and divergence in how stakeholders understand deinfluencing
- Rhetorical strategies used to construct deinfluenced "authenticity"
- Gaps between brand strategic intent and creator interpretation

Supplementary content analysis of deinfluencing videos produced will provide additional context for understanding production practices.

Phase 3: Framework Development (Week 6)

Synthesizing findings from stakeholder interviews and discourse analysis to develop the Authenticity Spectrum Framework, mapping deinfluencing partnerships along a continuum from authentic alignment to cynical co-optation based on identified patterns of brand-creator negotiation.



Research Timeline

- April 2026: REB protocol submission and approval process
- June 1: REB approval finalized; participant recruitment begins
- June 15- July 12 (Weeks 1-4): Brand interviews and transcription
- July 13-19 (Week 5): Comparative discourse analysis
- July 20-26 (Week 6): Framework development and synthesis

Interview transcriptions will be facilitated using AI transcription services (Otter.ai or similar) with manual verification for accuracy.

Interdisciplinary and International Focus

This research demands an interdisciplinary approach because deinfluencing cannot be understood through one lens alone. The project integrates marketing strategy (brand tactics), media studies (TikTok platform dynamics), critical theory (Fisher 2009; Banet-Weiser 2012), environmental sustainability (SDG 12, overconsumption), and cultural studies (creator labor and platform economies). Only by combining these fields can this research reveal how anti-consumption operates as both genuine resistance and marketing strategy.

While focused on Toronto, deinfluencing is a global phenomenon affecting brands and consumers worldwide. Toronto's D2C brands provide a concrete case study for understanding platform capitalism and influencer marketing that operates identically across major global urban centers. In particular, the Authenticity Spectrum Framework will apply internationally, contributing to global conversations on ethical marketing and sustainable consumption in digital consumer cultures.

Ethics Review

This research involves human participants and requires Research Ethics Board (REB) approval. Professor Guadagnolo will support the REB process. I will submit the protocol in April to secure approval by June 1, 2026. All participants will provide informed consent, and data will be anonymized to protect confidentiality, as requested.

Research Supervisor

Professor [Dan Guadagnolo](#) brings expertise in critical marketing studies and the political economy of branding. His scholarship on targeted marketing, branding, and advertising directly aligns with this investigation of how brands commodify anti-consumption practices. Guadagnolo will provide weekly supervision, support REB

approval, guide qualitative coding, offer feedback on framework development, and facilitate introductions to Toronto's D2C brand leaders through his academic network.

Outcomes

This research produces three interconnected outcomes:

1. **Consumer Literacy Tools:** Insights from brands translated into guidelines helping consumers understand the production mechanisms behind deinfluencing content.
2. **Industry Ethical Guidelines:** Framework identifying boundaries between authentic sustainability engagement and greenwashing, shared with Toronto Board of Trade and participating brands.
3. **Policy Considerations:** Analysis of current disclosure practices with insights relevant to future regulatory discussions on anti-consumption branded content.

This research contributes to **SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production)** by examining production mechanisms through which anti-consumption messaging becomes commodified in digital consumer cultures.

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