

Social Media “Stars” Vs “The Ordinary” Me
Examining the impact of influencer marketing on consumer behavior

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Introduction

According to the 2021 Influencer Marketing Benchmark report, the global market size of influencer marketing has catapulted from USD 1.7 billion in 2016 to nearly USD 13.8 billion in 2021, and more than 58.70% of Chief Marketing Officers (CMOs) have allocated separate budgets in their annual marketing plans for influencer marketing in 2021. This increase in spending and managerial focus on influencer marketing corresponds, in turn, to the role played by influencers in promoting products and services (Lim et al. 2017). Considered “trusted tastemakers” or opinion leaders who can significantly impact the purchase decisions of their followers, influencers can enable brands to increase their exposure, generate new leads and engage with a loyal community of followers (de Veirman et al., 2017; Statista, 2021). Offering targeted and tailored exposure to potential consumers through a meticulous documentation of their lives, influencers have the capacity to drive consumer interest and attention (Cohen, 2018). In addition, given the very high rates of consumer resistance to traditional forms of promotions (according to the State of Influencer Marketing Benchmark report 2022, the global average rate of desktop ad blocking is above 43%, with an expected YoY increase of 9%), social media influencers can act as trusted advisors to consumers, given that they are more likely to be perceived as regular people, and in several cases, as a friend or well-wisher (Levin, 2020). With over 3.96 billion active users of social media sites, it is thus no surprise that the domain of influencer marketing has attracted tremendous attention (Lim et al., 2017; Statista, 2022).

However, while the value of influencer marketing as a promotional channel continues to be acknowledged across practice and an emerging body of literature, a nuanced and consistent understanding of how influencer marketing shapes consumer behavior is lacking. With most influencer marketing campaigns being implemented based on a “trial and error” approach, there is little convergence on what constitutes a successful and strategic utilization of the engagement that influencers can generate for a brand among their follower community (Ye et al., 2021). For instance, there are no established metrics for selecting or assessing the value of influencer marketing, and research is wanting in terms of factors that shape the influencer-follower relationship and the ensuing effectiveness of promotions through influencer outreach (Gräve, 2019).

In particular, the way individuals think about and reveal themselves has significantly changed with the onset and rapid penetration of social media (Wesseldyk, 2017). Of increasing interest to both practice and theory is the phenomenon of identity reconstruction or virtual self-presentation in online environments, driven by constant exposure to and comparisons with the virtual self-presentation of others. Given that social media platforms can serve as a new space for identifying and making comparisons with referent others, a crucial direction of examination is: how can consumption of influencer content shape consumer behavior by influencing an individual's actual self-concept and self-guides like the ideal self?

Serious concerns have also been raised on the impact of exposure to influencer content on consumers' well-being, such as higher pressures on young adults (the most active demographic for consumption of influencer content is in the age group 18-25; Influencer Marketing Hub, 2022) to conform with “trends”, body image and appearance ideals, and constant comparisons with picture-perfect lives of others (e.g., Fardouly and Rapee, 2019). At present, however, there is limited research that examines the nature and outcomes of these comparisons that individuals make with other social media users and influencers, and there is

a need to develop more nuanced understandings of these experiences of self-discrepancy, the drive to reduce this discrepancy, the associated affective and cognitive experiences and the mechanisms employed by consumers to deal with such effects.

In addition, even though perceived relatability distinguishes influencers from traditional celebrities as brand endorsers, its impact on an individual's tendencies and experiences with social comparisons and self-discrepancies has not been examined. For example, the differences in perceptions of "closeness" or "similarity" with influencers vis a vis other content creators can have varying impacts on individual's perceptions of relatability and intimacy in relationships with influencers, and while there is a substantial body of literature examining how celebrity promotions through traditional media impact consumer behavior, the impact of influencer or peer promotions via social media is relatively understudied, especially in the context of self-discrepancies and the associated affect (Schouten et al., 2020; Lenhart, 2015).

At the same time, there is also a need to examine if and how consumers discern the difference between the virtual self-presentation of influencers and their actual selves, develop perceptions of the influencer's authenticity, and how such perceptions impact their interpretation and responsiveness to influencer content (Lee et al., 2021). Research is lacking in terms of how consumers respond in the event they find an influencer or her/his content to be inauthentic and its impact on the brands they endorse, a theme that has created empirical challenges for managers, but continues to remain underexamined in both theory and practice (Valor et al., 2017). Further, there may be differences in how perceptions of authenticity differentially impact consumer behavior in response to the content shared by more-similar/closer and less-similar/more distant users, but research on the subject is severely lacking (Lou et al., 2019).

Thus, we need a thorough understanding of how consumers interpret the content they are exposed to, the impact of these interpretations on their emotions and behaviors, the motivational and psycho-social processes that shape their responses and the mechanisms through which they make sense of their experiences with comparisons and self-discrepancies (Lee et al., 2021; Taillon et al., 2020). Such an examination can add to a nuanced understanding of how influencers shape consumer behavior and the nature of the influencer-follower relationship, thereby offering managerial and theoretical directions surrounding influencer marketing (Vrontis et al., 2021; Hudders et al., 2022).

The present study seeks to fill these gaps (Table 1) by examining 17 semi-structured interviews, and explores the meaning-making processes of individuals when they consume social media content shared by others, particularly influencers. We identify the presence of a highly engaged two-way interaction between influencers and their followers based on perceptions of homophily and authenticity. Individuals frequently internalize attributes and behaviors of influencers as their ideal self, and compare this ideal self with their actual self. The resulting self-discrepancy, we find, can lead to both negative and positive affect, the latter being a diversion from the theoretically argued outcomes of self-discrepancy. In the process, we also identify two important variables that determine the nature of affective responses experienced by an individual on experiencing self-discrepancies, self-acceptance and mindfulness, and provide evidence of how consumers use these two variables as mechanisms for dealing with discrepancies. We extend existing understandings of the self-discrepancy theory and its application to the influencer context, and by providing a nuanced

perspective on the factors affecting the strength of the influencer-follower relationship, offer insights for effective influencer marketing.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. We begin with a discussion of the literature followed by the research design and methodology. In the subsequent section, we share our findings and their implications across six identified themes. We conclude with a discussion on directions for future research and the limitations of the study.

Table 1- Gaps in Literature

Study	Whether impact of exposure on actual or ideal self examined?	Whether the tendency to compare or experience self-discrepancy examined?	Whether impact of exposure and/or self-discrepancy on affect & cognition examined?	Whether impact of perceptions of closeness or homophily examined?	Whether perceptions of authenticity and their impact on behavior examined?	Whether remedy variables or mitigation strategies to process impact of exposure examined?
Jin et al. (2019)	N	Y	N	Y	N	N
Shan et al. (2020)	Y	Y	N	N	N	N
Schouten et al. (2020)	Y	N	N	Y	N	N
Lee-Coco & Eckert (2020)	N	N	Y	Y	N	N
Aw & Chuah (2021)	N	Y	Y	N	N	N
Janssen et al. (2021)	N	N	N	N	Y	N
Li & Peng (2021)	N	N	Y	N	N	N
Bi & Zhang (2022)	N	N	N	N	N	Y
Shoenberger & Kim (2022)	N	N	N	Y	Y	N
Bu et al. (2022)	N	N	N	Y	N	N
This Study	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Review of Literature

Social media influencers and self-discrepancies

The rapid penetration of social media platforms has significantly changed how individuals think about and reveal themselves (Wesseldyk, 2017). As Dwivedi et al. (2021) argue, social media platforms can be understood as public spaces where people share their information and experiences for one of several reasons, including self-presentation, to signal or gain status, and to maintain relationships with others. As compared to physical world communications which prevent the individual from reconstructing their identity as per their wish because of constraints like the individual's corporal body and physical characteristics as well as their social environment, online platforms allow individuals to consciously construct an identity that matches their ideal self more closely, or to create a virtual identity that highlights specific features and glosses over the undesirable ones, especially by using affordances like filters and editing features (Radecke et al., 2021). Similarly, individuals can receive immediate feedback on their social media self-presentation, which can, in turn, be utilized by consumers to construct or present a virtual self that aligns with social standards of the online space (Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019; van der Schyff et al., 2022; Mandel et al., 2017).

It can be argued that what constitutes desirable or acceptable in a given social space tends to be associated with the behaviors exhibited by notable members of that space, and individuals

may internalize the salient attributes or features of popular others as their ideal self (Bessenoff, 2006). In the context of social media platforms, such standards tend to be set by popular users like influencers, such that exposure to the content shared by them may result in individuals accessing and comparing their self-concept with the influencer's self-presentation, and internalizing the attributes possessed by influencers as their ideal self. Such comparisons may, in turn, result in experiencing gaps between one's actual and ideal self, or a self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987), which may, in turn, shape the individual's responses and behaviors. However, extant research is yet to examine how exposure to social media influencers may impact an individual's self-concept or result in the internalization of the influencer's attributes and behaviors as important elements of one's ideal self, and the consequences of this process on an individual's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors (Aw and Chuah, 2021).

Thus, a crucial direction of examination relates to how the consumption of content shared by influencers can shape perceptions of one's actual and ideal self, and result in individuals engaging in social comparisons and experiencing self-discrepancies, but there is limited research that examines the nature and outcomes of comparisons that individuals may engage in with social media influencers (Wesseldyk, 2017; Dwivedi et al., 2021). For instance, Chae (2018) observes that an interest in and exposure to influencers results in the individual comparing his/her life with the influencers. Malar et al. (2018) contend that in the process of appropriating meaning from influencer content, individuals engage in an automatic self-appraisal. Similarly, Jin et al. (2019) and Aw and Chuah (2021) discuss how social comparisons and self-discrepancies between one's actual and ideal self are inevitable upon being exposed to influencer content. At the same time, however, these studies often treat self-discrepancy as a moderator and do not account for the possibility of a self-discrepancy being induced as an outcome of exposure to notable and popular others. In the present study, we try to explore this understanding by examining if individuals experience self-discrepancies as independent of exposure to influencers or as a trait variable, or if there is a possibility that by shaping one's ideals or influencing a sense of one's actual self, exposure to influencers can induce a discrepancy as a state variable instead.

Self-discrepancy, affect, and behavior

According to the self-discrepancy theory, experiencing a gap between one's actual and ideal self can lead to negative affect such as dejection, anxiety, guilt, shame, embarrassment, and powerlessness (e.g., Higgins, 1987; Tangney, 1999; Packard and Wooten, 2013; Sobol and Darke, 2014). Parallely, Dwivedi et al., (2021) report the presence of negative affect associated with exposure to influencers, manifested in expressions such as "feeling like I am not enough", or that "others have a better life than me." Now while there may be merit in examining if self-discrepancy can be a potential explanation for such an experience, a systematic examination of how such an affect may arise as an outcome of exposure to influencer content is currently missing in extant literature. In particular, no studies examine how individuals may experience a self-discrepancy because of exposure to influencer content, notably by impacting their actual or ideal self, and how such an experience may result in the theoretically predicted and empirically observed negative affect.

At the same time, and as Mestvirishvili and Mestvirishvili (2021) argue, in addition to such an experience of negative affect, there is a need for more nuanced examination of the emotional and behavioral outcomes of experiencing self-discrepancies, especially given that there are a few studies that argue that individuals may not experience the predicted negative affect such as depression and anxiety, but may instead experience more positive emotions

such as self-assurance and motivation to achieve one's ideal (e.g., Barnett et al., 2017). In the context of exposure to influencers, such an argument cannot be discounted, given that while influencers may serve as sources of comparisons and discrepancies, they are, at the same time, perceived as credible sources of information and recommendations on attaining a state of being, say in terms of appearance or lifestyle. Such understandings are, however, purely conceptual, and extant literature is yet to examine the impact of exposure to influencer content on an individual's behavior, driven by experiences of self-discrepancy and the resulting affect. Such an examination in the specific context of exposure to influencers is not only lacking, but significantly warranted, as it may offer implications for improving both our understanding of influencer marketing effectiveness as well as the consumer experience of engaging with influencers.

In particular, the likelihood of an individual to experience a self-discrepancy upon exposure to influencers, the theoretically predicted outcome of such an experience being negative affect, presents the need for an examination of the implications of such exposure for an individual's wellbeing. At the same time, and as Vrontis et al. (2022) argue, studies examining the impact of exposure to influencers on an individual's wellbeing are limited (e.g., Hudders and Lou, 2022). Notably, there are no studies that examine how individuals deal with self-discrepancies arising out of exposure to and comparisons with influencers and the mechanisms that individuals may knowingly or unknowingly employ for making sense of such experiences. Similarly, extant literature is yet to examine the factors or variables associated with the individual himself or herself, that may create similarities or differences in the way they seek, interpret, and respond to influencer content. Given that research on influencer marketing is emerging from a phase of infancy, there is a need to examine the implications it can have from a consumer wellbeing perspective, a gap that the present study seeks to fill by understanding consumers' experiences with influencer marketing and the processes and variables shaping the nature and implications of such experiences.

Perceptions of influencers – homophily and authenticity

In addition, a notable feature of social media platforms, as Perloff (2014) argues, is the presence of a range of users, including celebrities, influencers, peers, friends and family, who can be targets of social comparison. At the same time, the current body of literature is mixed on whether comparing oneself to these different targets may lead to differences in outcome severity (Wesseldyk, 2017). For instance, traditional celebrities are perceived as unattainable standards, as superior to even our best possible selves, or as too distant from oneself (Lockwood and Kunda, 1997). Influencers, on the other hand, are perceived as more approachable than celebrities, and people find them to be “real”, like the “the girl next door” (Korotina and Jargalsaikhan, 2016). Such perceptions may, in turn, differently shape the outcomes of experiencing a self-discrepancy - all else held constant and similar, the individual may notice how he or she is different from the referent on a subject where the referent claims expertise, and seek the advice of a referent perceived as more similar or achievable as a standard to attain that ideal-self.

Similarly, the intimacy in the influencer-follower relationship may be instrumental in reducing the psychological reactance towards their content, as well as the likelihood of the message being examined with suspicion or judgment (Shoenberger and Kim, 2021; Brinol and Petty, 2009). In turn, perceptions of homophily or similarity can result in the development of strong feelings of understanding, trust and connection between individuals (Ruef et al., 2003; Bu et al., 2022). Such an experience, as Miceli and Castelfranchi (2007) argue, will be more common toward someone who is more similar to oneself, driven by a

motivation to possess equivalent achievements and resulting in a desire to imitate the said individual (Hudders et al., 2022). As a result, while an individual may experience a self-discrepancy upon exposure to an influencer, at the same time, given that the influencer is perceived as similar to oneself, the individual may follow the influencer's recommendations with the motivation or inspiration to achieve the ideal self as typified by the influencer. At the moment, however, such an understanding is mostly conceptual, and it remains to be ascertained as to when an individual is likely to experience what kind of affect or thoughts on exposure to influencer content, and the impact of perceptions of perceived closeness on such experiences.

In addition to perceptions of closeness or similarity, the perception of authenticity or "realness" of an influencer has been found to play a role in shaping the nature of an individual's relationship with an influencer and their behaviors, such as willingness to follow the influencer's suggestions (Schouten et al., 2020). There is an emerging body of literature that examines how individuals develop and utilize perceptions of authenticity related to an influencer (e.g., Lee and Eastin, 2021; Janssen et al., 2021; Shoenberger and Kim, 2022), but these studies do not examine these understandings of perceived authenticity in conjunction with an individual's experiences with self-discrepancy, the resulting affective responses, and perceptions of homophily associated with the referent (Lou et al., 2019). Further, while it has been acknowledged to play a key role in determining how consumers interpret brand posts shared or promoted by different types of sources (e.g., Suciu, 2020), we know very little of how people judge the authenticity or inauthenticity of content, and the impact of these perceptions on an individual's interpretations of the influencer's virtual self, one's ideal and actual self, as well as attitudes, intents and behaviors towards the influencer and their recommended brands or products. It remains to be ascertained as to how consumers of content on social media perceive authenticity from the content they are exposed to, the process underlying the development and maintenance of such perceptions, and the impact of these perceptions on how the influencer is viewed or followed or the brand/product being promoted as well as on an individual's perceptions of his/her actual and ideal self.

Further, and on the nature of the relationship with influencers, several studies describe the relationship between users and influencers as akin to para-social interactions, or an illusionary albeit one-sided relationship between followers and a media persona (e.g., Jin and Ryu, 2020; Kim 2022). At the same time, however, there is empirical evidence to suggest that such a relationship may be more reciprocal, engaging, and premised on mutual exchange and co-creation of value (Lou and Hudders, 2022). The current study seeks to examine this inconsistency by exploring the nature of the influencer follower relationship and examines the interpretations of engagement as experienced in the context of exposure to influencer content, especially in the approaches employed by individuals for seeking assistance and addressing inconsistencies between the domains of their self-concept.

The preceding discussion thus provides us with some understanding of the range of themes, variables and processes that have been examined in the extant literature on social media influencers and at the same time, outlines a set of directions of inquiry that the present study seeks to examine. We discuss the methodology employed for our research objective and analysis of our findings next.

Methodology

The research questions addressed in this paper focused on exploring how and why exposure to social media influencers can affect an individual's behaviors, with specific reference to its implications for the individual's actual and ideal self and self-discrepancies. As Steckler

argues (in Tolley et al., 2016), qualitative research methods are suited for examining questions of a ‘how’ or ‘why’ nature, and given that our research question sought to explore similar questions with respect to the impact of influencer marketing on consumer behavior, we employed a qualitative design. Further, the literature on influencer marketing is in its infancy, and in the absence of any prior examinations of our research question, using a qualitative approach could enable us to elicit experiences, variables, and relationships, instead of imposing a pre-defined structure or limitations on the way individuals experience these phenomena. Our research question could also benefit from this research design in a manner as argued by Braun and Clarke (2006), who contend that the advantage of semi-structured interviews lies in their potential to help the researcher consider the ‘reality’ or the meaning of participants’ experiences and explore how these experiences and meanings might be informed by discourses, assumptions or ideas that exist in wider society. In addition, since the present study sought to examine themes related to one’s self-concept and other psychological constructs that may not be immediately and easily accessible via quantitative methods, the choice of qualitative interviews was considered to be most appropriate (Carson et al. 2001; Truong et al. 2015).

The research methodology consisted of 17 semi-structured in-depth interviews with individuals in the age-group 18-35, the largest and most active demographic that consumes influencer marketing content (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2022). In order to ensure the inclusion of knowledgeable participants, we used the iterative purposive sampling approach for sample recruitment (Frankel and Devers, 2000). With the intent of analyzing a small number of substantively significant cases, interviews were conducted until no new themes emerged from additional interviews and till we achieved convergence of views by first author, who also shared demographic similarities with the participants, thereby enhancing the quality and openness of the discussions (Luker, 2008; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Jacobson and Harrison, 2022). Interviews lasted between about 45- minutes to over an hour, were transcribed and coded using Atlas.ti 9, and analyzed using the thematic analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Participants’ names were replaced with pseudonyms in order to protect their identities. Participants also self-reported demographic information on age, gender and professional background.

Table 2 - Participant Profile for Qualitative Study

S.No.	Participant Name*	Gender	Age	Student/Professional
1.	Shreya	Female	28	Student
2.	Mahima	Female	26	Student
3.	Mridul	Male	27	Working Professional
4.	Mayank	Male	25	Working Professional
5.	Rasika	Female	33	Working Professional
6.	Sujata	Female	28	Student
7.	Aditi	Female	25	Working Professional
8.	Shivam	Male	28	Student
9.	Ramish	Male	23	Student
10.	Abhishek	Male	35	Student
11.	Tanya	Female	20	Student
12.	Tisha	Female	22	Student
13.	Vasudha	Female	23	Student
14.	Arman	Male	28	Student

15.	Gayatri	Female	32	Student
16.	Sarvari	Female	29	Working Professional
17.	Radhika	Female	29	Student

* names changed for anonymity

Findings

Based on the review of the literature and semi-structured interviews, we identified six themes that explain how individuals view, interpret and respond to exposure to social media influencers. Each of these themes is discussed next.

Exposure to Influencer Content, Comparisons and Self-Discrepancy

Across our data items, we observed that exposure to the content shared by other users, especially influencers, was typically associated with making comparisons - most respondents stated that they often found themselves engaging in comparing with influencers. These comparisons could be automatic or purposeful and were related to specific dimensions of the individual's life, notably in terms of body image, lifestyle (especially material life), and professional and personal growth. For instance, a female respondent (aged 23) specifically associated exposure to influencer content with comparing herself with them in terms of their lifestyle, and feeling the need to do something about her actual self:

But if you are regularly following influencers, are regularly seeing what kind of clothes they're wearing or, how do they portray themselves on social media, it starts affecting you as well. I mean, you feel that even you should take some inspiration, take some lessons from them.

Comparisons were often made between one's actual offline self and others' online or virtual selves, where the virtual self of others was often treated as an ideal, even when participants acknowledged a gap between their online and offline selves, as well as an understanding that such a gap possibly existed for most others as well. This was coupled with creativity and impression-management strategies used by individuals to express themselves and signal a virtual self-concept which may or may not be similar to their offline self-concept. Self-presentation on social media was then associated with avenues for constructing one's virtual self, akin to their ideal self - as jovial, happy, successful, and beautiful, using the available features of social media and a careful selection of posts that allowed the respondent to be more like her/his ideal self, especially when such a task was not achievable offline. For instance, a female participant (aged 20) described how people's online profiles were usually significantly different from their offline selves, and how social media affordances helped her in creating a profile that was similar to her ideal self:

I know some people, like IRL, in real life, and then I go see their social media profiles, they are not the same people! I would've mistaken them for some other people. But then, I think people keep their profiles in a way that they think that their life ideally would be like. Because it's like, we like movies, or series or any piece of media. And we think or hope that it would be just great to have that kind of life. But we cannot do that, so we just take this opportunity of creating our own social media profiles to look like that ideal, because we have the liberty to do anything with it [one's profile].

Similarly, a male participant (aged 28) shared how online, he could take the time to express himself in a manner that would make him sound more humorous (a dimension of his ideal

self), something that he was unable to do offline, and how he learned from others and copied successful content creators to get more engagement and social acceptance:

Let's say I want to make a joke. I'm not someone who can come up with a timely joke. But when I can sit and think, I can write something that makes people laugh, right? So that doesn't come in a natural setting. Right? ... And there are also certain things that I learned from others. If I use this hashtag, it may be perceived as cool. Travelgasm, or foodgasm, or something like that. I see others do that, so the posts which have garnered a lot of likes, and I think oh, it has got a lot of likes, maybe I should copy that.

Several participants thus reported consciously constructing their virtual selves in line with an ideal or desired self, which in turn, was often defined with respect to social media standards as exemplified by popular individuals like influencers. Comparisons were usually upward – most respondents reported comparing themselves with those who were better off than them on certain matters of salience, such as professional success, an enjoyable lifestyle, or body image/physique. Self-discrepancy associated with such comparisons involved most respondents comparing their actual selves with the content shared by influencers and other social media users, often using the influencer as an ideal point of reference. Influencer as the ideal was a recurring theme across our data items - many respondents identified influencers as ideals or aspirational figures that they often found themselves comparing with and imitating. Self-discrepancy arising out of such comparisons could, in turn, influence the self-presentation efforts of the individual in terms of how they altered their virtual self and why. For example, a female participant (aged 23) shared how she was motivated to craft a virtual self that was similar to what influencers were doing:

Yes, I mean you do feel that alright, if she's [influencer] doing it, then I don't think that I cannot do this. I mean, even I have good sense of aesthetics and I also have good clothes. I can also apply makeup, I can also post pictures. I can at least start a journey on that road. It comes to you if you're watching lot of influencers on a regular basis.

Based on these observations, we propose that,

P1: Exposure to the content shared by influencers can influence one's ideal self, and results in experiencing a gap or a self-discrepancy between one's actual self and the ideal self influenced by exposure to influencers.

P2: Comparing one's actual self with an ideal self influenced by influencers, and the resulting self-discrepancy impact an individual's virtual self-presentation efforts and purchase behaviors aimed at reducing the discrepancy.

Perceived closeness to influencers

We found that closely associated with respondents' tendency to compare and experience self-discrepancy was their perception of how close the individual they were comparing themselves with was to them. Some respondents stated that they compared themselves more with "people who are less distant from me than those who are more distant" or in terms of a perceived psychological distance from the point of comparison. Defining this distance in terms of a continuum between people they knew personally (low distance) and celebrities (high distance), most respondents placed influencers closer to themselves than celebrities, referring to them as "ordinary people like me." The tendency to compare oneself with others and experience a discrepancy, we found, was higher in the case of exposure to others who were perceived as closer or similar in living conditions as oneself. For instance, a female participant (aged 29) stated:

I guess that the space where I compare the most is the closer set of people – your friends, your family. And then, I think I can say that I have the people I am intellectually or emotionally engaged with on social media, like influencers ...And then finally the celebrity accounts - I'm least bothered with what they're doing.

In addition, while influencers were often treated as an ideal self across our discussions, a potential explanation for this experience, we found, was related to the perceived attainability of the influencer as a standard or ideal. As opposed to celebrities, influencers were perceived as less distant or more achievable standards and feeling closer or distant to some people versus others was closely associated with who was treated as an ideal by respondents. Similarly, relatability and perceptions of similarity or homophily, were also reported by several participants as reasons for following influencers and treating them as ideals or standards worth achieving. When they perceived someone to be similar in tastes or values, stage in life, demography, and purchasing power, participants reported a greater tendency to compare and get influenced. For instance, a female participant (aged 22) stated that:

When I look at look at a celebrity wearing something, the first thing that comes to my mind would be that, okay, this might be expensive. I might not be able to afford it, I mean she's wearing it so maybe I won't wear it. But now that I know that influencers are promoting such brands, they want us to wear it... Now I will still consider it - okay she's wearing it, then maybe I can style it too.

Perceived closeness was also associated with the importance given to inputs from influencers – respondents who identified an influencer as her/his ideal consciously identified the gaps between themselves and the influencer and tried to imitate the influencer to achieve their ideal self. Given the underlying perceptions of relatability and similarity, several respondents followed suggestions given by influencers who were perceived as more similar to them in terms of their stage in life, career, lifestyle, skin type etc. For instance, on being asked why the respondent thought that influencers exerted an influence on people, and why she identified some influencers as her ideal self, a female participant (aged 25) explained:

I think influencers can influence people, that's the most important thing, and how they influence is because I think people are able to connect with them. One can connect with

them, possibly because of various reasons. One is relatability. Second is that their post could be aspirational for several people, it may be that their followers don't have so happening lives, so they kind of live that happening life by watching the posts of their influencers.... something like that.

Based on the preceding discussion and literature, we posit that,

P3: Self-discrepancy arising out of exposure to influencers is lower in the case of exposure to influencers perceived as more homophilic than less homophilic.

P4: Influencers, in general, are perceived as more homophilic and closer to oneself, and as a result, self-discrepancy arising out of exposure to influencers will be lower, given that the influencer appears that much more achievable or attainable compared to a standard perceived as distant or heterophilic (like celebrities).

Affect and cognition shaped by exposure to influencer content and the resulting self-discrepancy

At the same time, several respondents reported feeling dejected and anxious on exposure to influencer content. They often found themselves comparing their current actual selves with what they saw others' doing, and on realizing that there existed a gap between their actual selves and their ideal self, the ideal being defined in terms of what others were doing, they felt demotivated, disappointed with themselves, frustrated, angry and envious. "Feeling like you're not enough" or self-doubt, and lowered evaluations of the actual self were commonly observed in our data set. For instance, a female respondent (aged 28) argued how exposure to influencer content and comparisons could create a lot of pressure to conform to a social ideal, and result in negative experiences for an individual. Another female respondent (aged 33) described how much of the content on social media reflected some type of ideal, which was ideal in being "beautiful" or "desirable" and could result in making regular users insecure. She stated:

On average, I think people become insecure about themselves by watching [influencers' content]. The kind of image that most people project on social media is more like goody-goody, everything is good and everything is perfect. Even the filters that they use, everything is perfect. But I think that's what people want to see, because it looks beautiful. I'm not sure how many people would be interested in watching reality. And that's the reason that the majority [of social media users] focus on just the idealistic image over there.

In addition, not only did individuals experience negative affect and thoughts arising out of self-discrepancy and comparisons, but they also experienced these thoughts and feelings more powerfully in case of comparisons with people perceived as closer to oneself than those considered more distant. For instance, a female participant (student, aged 26) described how the potency of such an affect was stronger in the case of people perceived to be similar or closer to oneself than others:

Oh, then the amount of negativity that I have increases, haha, two folds! Because I know them, they're just like me! I know who they are and what they have done with themselves... And then I think that even I am working hard, then why are things not working out for me?

Interestingly, while recognizing a gap between one's actual and ideal self is associated primarily with negative affect across extant literature (e.g., Higgins, 1987; Ahadzadeh et al., 2017; Huber et al., 2018), we observed that for comparisons with influencers, not all participants experienced negative affect and thought. Some reported more mixed feelings about exposure to the content shared by people/influencers who shared similar interests as them, and treated comparisons as more constructive or as opportunities for consciously implementing the suggestions or lifestyle choices of influencers for personal growth. For example, a male respondent (aged 28) who loved travelling, described how he felt when he saw travel influencers living his ideal life:

Sometimes it's awe-inspiring. At the same time, I'm not doing any of it. My life is just going... That feeling is also strong, like, why don't I have the courage to take that step, to do something like that, can I? It's a mixture of a very good feeling and an extremely bad feeling, always.

In addition, some participants reported experiencing a positive affect after comparing themselves with influencers who were perceived as ideals, as opposed to the theoretical prediction of the self-discrepancy theory that experiencing a gap between one's actual and ideal self should result in negative affect. Several participants reported feeling motivated, inspired and hopeful about achieving one's ideal self, without experiencing any negative affect per se. A potential explanation for this observation is that since influencers were perceived as "more like me" or closer to oneself, treating them as representative of one's ideal self enhanced the perceptions of how attainable that ideal self was. For example, a female respondent (aged 28) said that she often saw influencers living her ideal life, and how that gave her hope and motivation that she could, someday, achieve the same life.

At the same time, she, and others described how influencers served as solution providers to reduce the self-discrepancy they experienced (interestingly, this discrepancy was an outcome of exposure to the influencer in the first place) and that they actively used influencers' advice, suggestions, and experiences to make their own decisions. Across all such responses, an underlying continuity was the perception of influencers as valuable and trustworthy sources of information about a specific subject. For others, identifying the gap between their actual and ideal self was also associated with identifying the scope for improvement and making conscious efforts to emulate influencers for developing oneself towards their ideal self. For example, a male respondent (aged 27) stated that coming across an influencer who was living his ideal life inspired him because "it kind of then juxtaposes what I was thinking to what is being shown." He said:

I have a very high tendency of comparing myself with others, not in terms of who's good or who's worse off, but just like how others, who are like me, are doing things, and how can I improve by learning from them. And naturally, the more similar someone is to me, the easier it will be to imitate them!

It is important to note at this juncture that positive and negative affect should not be perceived as opposites or strongly negatively correlated, and are instead, highly orthogonal. As Watson et al. (1988) argue, positive affect reflects the extent to which a person feels enthusiastic, active and alert and is a state of high energy, full concentration and pleasurable engagement or, whereas low positive affect is characterised by sadness and lethargy. On the other hand, negative affect is a general dimension of subjective distress and unpleasurable engagement that subsumes a variety of aversive mood states like anger, contempt, guilt, fear

and nervousness, with low negative affect being a state of calmness and serenity. Based on these observations, we posit that,

P5: Self-discrepancy arising out of exposure to social media influencers can result in both positive and negative affect.

P6: Given the same degree of self-discrepancy arising out of exposure, the potency of positive or negative affect is greater for discrepancy arising out of exposure to influencers than celebrities.

Self-acceptance

In examining the conditions under which an individual was likely to experience negative or positive affect, we found that more self-accepting individuals were less likely to experience negative emotions and engaged in constructive rather than destructive thoughts and actions. Self-acceptance is defined as when “the individual fully and unconditionally accepts himself whether or not he behaves intelligently, correctly, or competently and whether or not other people approve, respect, or love him” (Ellis, 1977, p.101). While several individuals said that they felt a lot of pressure when they saw content shared by influencers, we observed that as their sense of acceptance of their own limitations and strengths increased, the pressure and discomfort associated with the comparisons and self-discrepancy decreased. For example, a respondent (female student, aged 27) described how she gradually developed a sense of control over her consumption of content and her subsequent emotional responses, and the importance of self-acceptance in doing so:

I think self-acceptance is like one of the most critical aspects about any individual in any context. I mean even if I'm looking at let's say work behavior, that personal sense of acceptance is very important ... because that becomes a contributing factor to how well you are able to answer that question, what is (in the content shared by the influencer) triggering me? Why is it triggering me? So, I guess that is where self-acceptance comes in.

Similarly, a male respondent (aged 27) described how he was comfortable with most aspects of his life, and did not see merit in comparing each and every dimension of his life to what was shown on social media. Instead, he shared how comparing himself with another individual leading his ideal life only inspired him to emulate those aspects that were feasible for him and ignore the rest, resulting in an overall positive experience.

Another female respondent (aged 29) described how she gradually developed a sense of control over her consumption of content and her subsequent emotional responses, and the importance of self-acceptance in doing so. She shared:

Some of us are in that illusion that this is desirable and this is what we need to achieve, right ? So that's a toxic space there. If we're not acceptant of our conditions and limitations- it's blindness or a lack of self-acceptance, that I don't need to chase these standards.

Further, she described her struggles with body image, and it was only after she recognized that she was fat-phobic herself that her emotional response to body image-related self-discrepancies changed. In that sense, she argued how developing a sense of self-acceptance over time enabled her to cope with the negative affect of exposure to ideal virtual presentations of others. She explained:

I think it has been very, very disintegrating and painful, and to be honest, like, I have nothing very nice (to say) about this experience, except for the fact that it has been about self-exploration and self-realization. So like, a lot of things that we don't like are because of our inherent biases, right? Like being fat phobic myself or discovering that I'm fat phobic, like that has been a huge part of the journey as well. Right? I think I pretty much still make comparisons, but the comparison, and the realization that follows, it doesn't trigger me, right? So if today I see a well-toned person, I think that, okay, they are doing something good for themselves, and they are okay about it, they're happy about it or whatever. And my body is different, but that's it, like, that means nothing.

Thus, we propose,

P7: Individuals with higher levels of self-acceptance are likely to experience more positive affect on exposure to influencers' content than individuals with lower levels of self-acceptance.

P8: Individuals with higher levels of self-acceptance are likely to experience less negative affect on exposure to influencers' content than individuals with lower levels of self-acceptance.

Discerning the virtual from the real – the role of mindfulness

A closely related variable to self-acceptance was mindfulness in consuming content, particularly in terms of developing a consciousness regarding the “realness” of what one saw on social media, and how that determined the individual’s response to the content shared by influencers. Mindfulness, which may be defined as “the state of being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present” (Brown and Ryan, 2003; p.822), was exercised in recognizing that what others portrayed on their social media profile was a selective and more favorable portion of their actual experiences, and in revising one’s automatic thoughts and feelings to account for the edited or staged aspects of an influencer’s virtual self. For example, a male respondent (aged 25) shared his experience of creating content as an influencer, and how the posts he shared were extremely selective, and represented only a part of reality. He also described how, in the absence of this knowledge, exposure to content could result in negative emotions. He described:

There is a high projection of the happy... the influencers are always trying to influence people in a certain way, right? You don't get to see the other side at all. And that is not visible easily unless you start creating such content. You don't get to realize that, that consciousness doesn't come, and that is so bad. You think it is, it is so easy, they are having so much fun. And that makes it hard ... that that comparison is, sometimes it is very bad.

Similarly, a female participant (aged 23) described how initially she would often feel bad about herself because she was very distant from her ideal self as shown by influencers, but gradually developed a consciousness about influencer content being edited and altered to look more likeable and attractive.

I think, when it comes to influencer marketing, there is a very thin line (of) difference between feeling motivated and feeling bad about yourself, because as I told you, like I am sitting in a night suit and I am thinking that if it would have been an influencer, I would

have been wearing better clothes, hairstyle and everything. So that makes me feel bad. But I don't feel bad when I remember that this is not how they actually are, and that it just their job [to look good].

In that sense, several participants reported that they often reminded themselves not to compare their actual offline self with an influencer's carefully crafted virtual self. Describing how mindless consumption of influencer content could have a negative effect on a user, a female respondent (aged 29) described the need for one to be cognizant of the fact that much of what was shown in the virtual space was altered or different from the reality:

The idea of getting sucked into this whole world which is a virtual space and kind of getting addicted to it and seeing other people's lives in a very almost constructed way, in the sense that they see only a part of the life of the influencer. They will not see the whole thing, but they will take it to be real and apply it to themselves, which can be harmful.

Comparisons between virtual images of others with one's offline actual self were thus affected by the ability to discern that "all that glitters is not gold", and that the virtual self that others, including influencers, showed on social media was a part of an altered self-concept and not the actual self of the individual in question. This realization was often gradual, and most participants acknowledged that online content was often staged and showed a selective part of others' self-concept. Thus, we propose,

P9: Individuals with higher levels of mindfulness are likely to experience more positive affect on exposure to influencers' content than individuals with lower levels of mindfulness.

P10: Individuals with higher levels of mindfulness are likely to experience less negative affect on exposure to influencers' content than individuals with lower levels of mindfulness.

Perceptions of authenticity

In addition, respondents described the importance of perceptions of authenticity of influencers in affecting their behavior aimed at reducing self-discrepancies. Several respondents described the process of actively evaluating whether the content shared was genuine and authentic, and how that evaluation was used as a deciding factor on whether or not to treat the individual as an ideal, and if they should engage with or continue following an influencer and their advice and suggestions. For instance, a respondent (female, age 28) described how she developed perceptions of an influencer's authenticity:

She (influencer) used to talk about PCOS, and weight gain issues, that is something I could relate to her, so that is why I started following her. Gradually I realized this woman is at the same time promoting a lot of products. She'll pick up any product, pick up a serum from five different brands like this is good, that is good. How do I distinguish. Correct? So I have these trust issues in me, like if you like Charlotte Tillbury (a luxury makeup brand), and you also like Plum (a drugstore makeup brand), you like everything, right? So again, how do I know what is right?

Similarly, others argued for a need for influencers to share the entirety of their experiences, not just the happy, glamorous or successful sides, as well as the extent to which they could trust the influencer as a regular individual. For instance, a female respondent (aged 31) shared how engaging with the journey of the influencer created a strong connect with them, and a desire to grow with them in the process of both defining and achieving an ideal self:

I think, on these platform, people see the entire journey of these influencers. Most influencers are from backgrounds like ours. From the beginning, we see their beautiful growth, and I think that inspires people. I think because we are able to see their journey, you feel like you are a part of their life. And that's why you're able to connect with them.

Perceptions of authenticity were strongly interlinked with how holistic an influencer's content was, and several participants discussed how they expected an influencer to shoulder the responsibility to disclose all, positive and negative, dimensions of their experiences. Some respondents also shared anecdotes where influencers had openly described the full range of their experiences, adding to perceptions of authenticity and genuineness. This, in turn, resulted in making the relationship with the said influencer more meaningful and endearing. At the same time, respondents displayed high resistance to traditional forms of promotions, and seldom expected authentic information from celebrities, conditioned by the idea that celebrities were always paid for reviews and hardly ever used the products they were endorsing. Overall, consumers were found to actively evaluate the content presented to them for authenticity, and rewarded influencers perceived as authentic with positive forms of engagement such as liking and sharing their posts, and punished inauthentic influencers by distancing, disengaging, and at times, negatively describing such influencers and their recommended brands. Based on these observations, we propose that:

P11: Perceived authenticity of influencers is likely to impact consumer response arising out of self-discrepancy and the resulting affect in favor of the products/brands used, recommended or promoted by the influencer.

Discussion

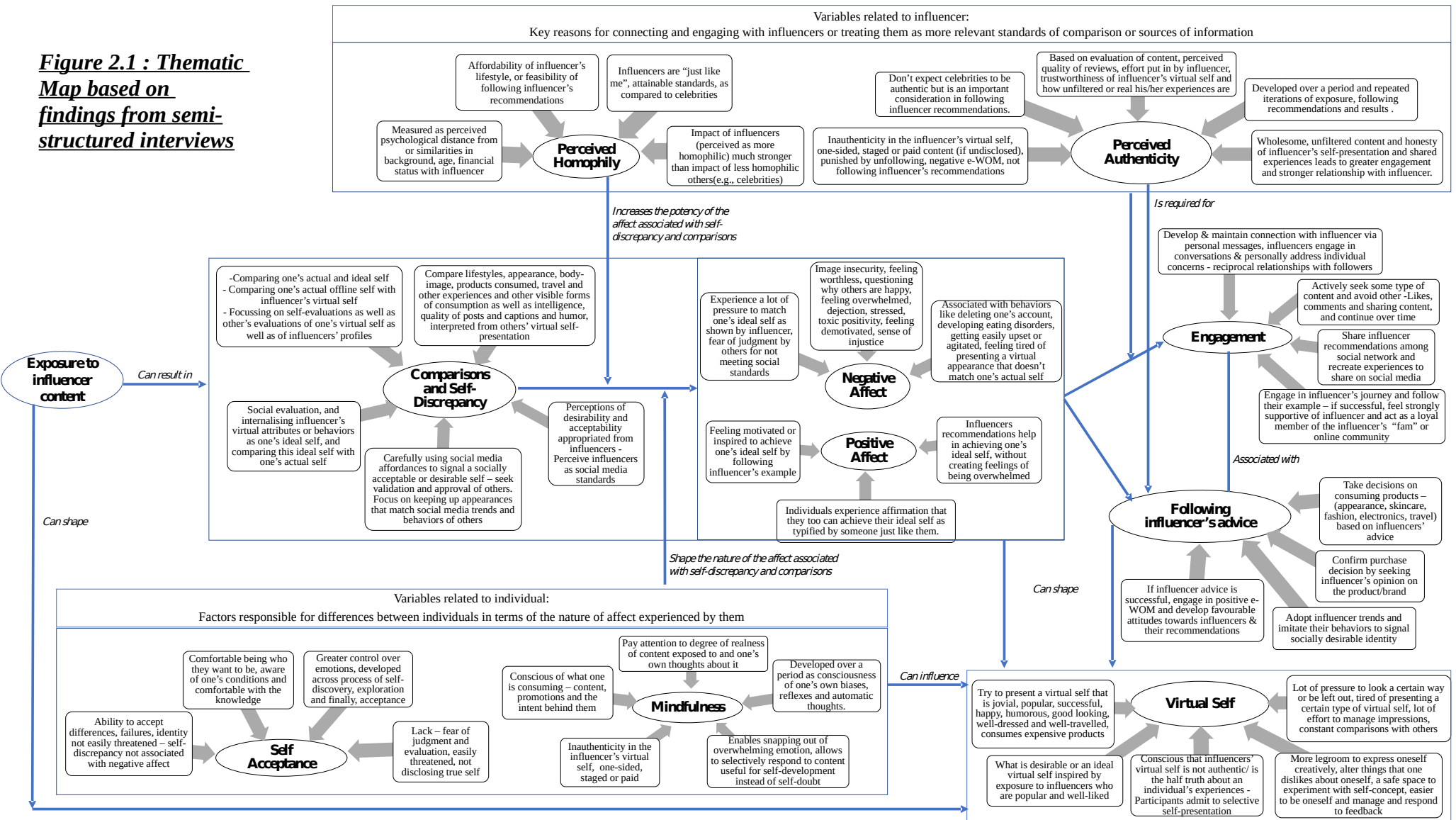
Figure 2.1 summarizes these observations and propositions. Across an emerging body of literature, there is preliminary evidence for how exposure to influencer marketing is associated with social comparisons, which may, in turn, shape an individual's behavior (e.g., Hudders and Lou, 2022; Chae, 2018). At the same time, the question of how exposure to influencer marketing drives consumer behavior by influencing an individual himself/herself remains unexamined, and the present study seeks to explore the implications of such exposure for one's actual and ideal self, a comparison between the two, and the resulting self-discrepancy. As Bessenoff (2006) argues, a behavior may be viewed as an exemplar of what constitutes an ideal in a social space if it is admired or appreciated by a large number of people. Across our data items, participants repeatedly identify influencers as social media standards, and tend to internalize the attributes and behaviors of the influencer as necessary or relevant to their ideal self. This is similar to the argument made by Malar et al. (2018) that exposure to notable others in a given space results in an appropriation of meaning from the content as well as an automatic self-appraisal, and we add nuance to this argument by examining how the individual compares his or her actual self with an ideal self as defined in relation to the influencer, and how the resulting self-discrepancy eventually shapes the individual's behavior towards the influencer and their recommendations.

Further, and in a departure from extant applications of self-discrepancy as a trait variable (e.g., Jin et al., 2017; Aw and Chuah, 2021), we examine how self-discrepancy may arise out of exposure to influencer content, and its subsequent impact on an individual's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Extant literature offers evidence for the psychological, affective, and

cognitive impacts of self-discrepancy, which may, in turn, lead to behaviors directed at reducing the discrepancy (e.g., Scheier and Carver, 1990; Sela and Shiv, 2009). Across our interviews, we recorded the presence of the theoretically predicted and commonly documented negative affect as an outcome of experiencing a self-discrepancy. This observation underscores the importance of the discussion on the ill-implication of influencer marketing, in that repeated exposure to influencer content that presents standards, lifestyles, and body images that are out of reach or infeasible for a regular social media user can result in unrealistic comparisons and emotional experiences of dejection, anxiety, feeling insufficient or not worthy enough and an overall lowered sense of wellbeing.

In consequence, an individual may resort to behaviors aimed at reducing the gap between their actual self and this externally defined ideal self, such as by consuming products with a signaling value or using affordances like filters for presenting an altered self that is more attuned to the trends and standards set by the influencer. Evidence from our study clearly suggests that individuals engage in behaviors as characteristic of self-promotion in the form of engaging in and posting about consumption behaviors with a signaling value or using affordances like filters to build a socially desirable identity. Now on the one hand, one can focus on the freedom that comes with this ability to have a virtual self as distinct from one's actual self and more aligned with their ideal self (Suh et al., 2011).

Figure 2.1 : Thematic Map based on findings from semi-structured interviews



At the same time, in the absence of a virtual self anchored in one's actual self, individuals may engage in behaviors that are harmful to others around them, especially because they can now pretend to be someone they are not (Jensen Schau and Gilly, 2003; Suh, 2013). Similarly, social media usage can result in comparing one's offline self to an influencer's online self, which may or may not be similar to the influencer's actual offline self, creating unrealistic standards of comparison, (Ahadzadeh et al., 2017; Vogel et al., 2014). Such experiences can be emotionally draining and negatively impact an individual's wellbeing.

The consumption behavior associated with such experiences can be interpreted in one of two ways – on the one hand, consumption can offer a compensatory pathway for the individual to reduce the negative affect associated with the discrepancy, such as by signaling an ideal self through consumption. At the same time, this negative affect can result in problematic behaviors such as over-consumption, eating disorders, and body-image issues, especially in young adults. This evidence relates to the prominent body of discussion on the dark side of social media and contributes to the emerging literature on the welfare implications and challenges associated with influencer marketing (Hudders and Lou, 2022; Dwivedi et al., 2021).

However, it is important to note that not all experiences of self-discrepancy associated with influencers may lead to negative affect and that alone. Notably, we find that self-discrepancy, which tends to be associated with comparing one's body image, lifestyle, and professional success with the influencer, can also result in a positive affect, a novel outcome hitherto undocumented in the influencer literature employing self-discrepancy as an explanatory variable. For instance, we find that several participants feel dejected and motivated at the same time, driven by the understanding that while they may be distant from their ideal self, that ideal self may still be an achievable target because an influencer, who is someone 'just like me,' has been able to achieve it. We also find the presence of positive affect and that alone, upon experiencing a gap between one's actual self and an ideal self as typified by the influencer, like feeling encouraged, inspired, motivated and driven to achieve their ideal self, without experiencing a parallel negative affect. A potential explanation for these observations, we find, lies in the uniqueness of the influencer-follower relationship - the same influencer serves both as a source for comparison or experiencing a self-discrepancy and, at the same time, offers suggestions on how one can achieve that ideal self and reduce the self-discrepancy. Further, and by virtue of being perceived as someone similar to oneself, the influencer renders that ideal self that much more attainable or achievable as a target, and as a result, an individual may experience positive affect.

These observations and arguments can be contextualized with reference to extant literature that argues that exposure to another individual's lifestyle, recommendations or choices can result in an inspiration to adopt the exemplar through more positive, rather than negative emotional experiences. For instance, the social defaults theory (Huh et al., 2014, cf., Ki et al., 2022) contends that individuals may become more positive and feel inspired and motivated, and experience an emotional bonding with a referent, in our case, the influencer (Böttger et al., 2017). Comparisons with individuals one has an affinity for can lead to a desire to acquire what the other person possesses or endorses, without experiencing any hostility towards them or their endorsed product or behavior per se, and can be associated with behaviors such as sharing

knowledge or adoption of behaviors of the referent (Landis et al., 2009; Ki et al., 2022; Jin et al., 2017).

Such an experience, as Miceli and Castelfranchi (2007) have posited, will be common toward someone who is perceived as similar to oneself, driven by a motivation to possess equivalent achievements and resulting in a desire to imitate the said individual (influencer or celebrity). Similarly, Ki et al. (2022) and Chartrand and Bargh (1999) argue that individuals may experience a strong emotional bond or empathy with others if they identify with them. As we observe across our study, not only do individuals follow influencers for their expertise and recommendations on achieving an ideal self, but they are also much more likely to seek inputs from influencers because they can identify with them and perceive them more achievable as ideals. This homophily could be related to one's status (including demographic similarities like age and sex, as well as acquired characteristics like occupation, religion, and education) or to one's values (including tastes, experiences, values and beliefs) (Kazarsfeld and Merton, 1954).

Feelings of similarity and homophily can, in turn, positively influence the nature of the relationship with the influencer, the intent to maintain the relationship, and behaviors towards the recommendations (including those for products and brands) made by the influencer, driven by strong feelings of understanding, trust, and connection between individuals (Ruef et al., 2003; Bu et al., 2022). When an individual experiences a self-discrepancy associated with exposure to influencer content, perceived homophily can have a *ceteris paribus* effect – all else held constant and similar, the individual may notice how he or she is different from the influencer on a subject where the influencer claims expertise, and seek the influencer's advice to attain that ideal. For instance, individuals may experience a gap between their ideal and actual skin on coming across an influencer with skin that resembles or typifies one's ideal, and eventually seek the advice of that influencer, should he or she be perceived as more homophilic in terms of their background, attitudes, or values. Individuals may do so by engaging more in the influencer's comments and personal messages and actively seek the influencer's support and recommendations, driven by perceptions of the influencer as an achievable ideal self.

In addition, we identify the role of two variables that shape the nature of affect experienced by individuals in relation to a self-discrepancy, and which can explain why some individuals were likely to have more positive or more negative experiences as compared to others. Extant research is yet to examine the mechanisms or processes employed by individuals and the variables specific to the individual himself/herself that can impact how one makes sense of their experiences with influencer exposure. Across our interviews, we observe that individuals who are more mindful and self-acceptant tend to report more positive affect after recognizing a gap between their actual self and an ideal self as typified by the influencer, as compared to less mindful or self-acceptant individuals. To the extent that while most participants admit engaging in comparisons and self-appraisals, those who display a greater sense of acceptance tend to view discrepancies as opportunities for growth and to improve themselves, rather than operating from a position of self-doubt or downward evaluation of their current self. Most participants describe how they compare their actual self with an ideal self defined in relation to the influencer, but as their degree of self-acceptance increases (which in itself can be a process that takes place over repeat exposures and a period of time), their ability to recognize the potential feasibility of an ideal self as exemplified by the influencer, given their limitations and capabilities, improves.

They are able to recognize and regulate when self-discrepancies are to be viewed as learning opportunities for an improved and attainable future self and when they are to be disregarded as irrelevant to their circumstances and the way they are. Thus more self-acceptant individuals report more positive affective experiences like feeling motivated and inspired, as compared to individuals who are less self-acceptant and tend to view all comparisons, whether or not they are viable for them in their given circumstances, as reasons for negative affect.

Mindfulness manifests in the individual's tendencies to be aware of what is being presented to them, the merit of the content and the content creator in making value-laden claims, and the extent to which others' virtual self-expressions are a true reflection of their offline or actual experiences. More mindful individuals tend to differentiate between aspects of the influencer's virtual self that are feasible or achievable as realistic targets from those that are either unrealistic or unattainable in their present circumstances. In addition to this systematic evaluation of content and influencers, they tend to focus on areas or recommendations that can allow them to become more successful in achieving specific attributes or behaviors essential for their ideal self, and approach self-discrepancy from a constructive and self-growth perspective than a negative or self-doubt approach. Mindfulness, as we observe, may also be exercised in the extent to which an individual is able to separate his/her need for information from an influencer from a tendency to internalize anything or everything about an influencer's self-presentation as his or her ideal self. As a result, we find that mindfulness plays a role in determining the nature of affect and thought that self-discrepancy results in and the subsequent behavior of the individual.

These observations have several implications – both in terms of the content presented to an individual as well as her/his personal characteristics shaping the manner in which they consume or interpret such content. Firstly, this observation can shape future research on examining the impact of processes and variables inherent to the individual, such as self-acceptance and mindfulness, which can shape the positivity or negativity of consumer response to self-discrepancies associated with influencer exposure. This has several welfare implications, and can be studied further to examine if interventions designed around mindfulness and self-acceptance can be used to make the overall consumer experience more conducive to consumer wellbeing. At the same time, these observations can help shape the nature of the content and communications themselves – for instance, while most participants associate influencer content with a lot of pressure to conform to virtual ideals, influencers can create more meaningful and emotionally strong relationships with their followers if they support the follower's journey of self-acceptance, or by reminding them to be mindful of the content they consume. Further still, they can actively implement strategies like disclosures of editing or paid promotions and ensure their followers engage in mindful consumption of content, and at the same time, remind them to engage in practices and behaviors as reflective of self-acceptance and appreciation of oneself. They can also do this by actively presenting more authentic experiences or by disclosing how altered their content is, and to what extent it should be perceived as an achievable standard.

Further, not only can sharing information about their personal lives with their followers, like their emotions, experiences and relationships, create reciprocal and more engaged relationships with the influencer, but it also gives an impression of authenticity. Labels such as “real” or “authentic” are often used for influencers to indicate their followers' perceptions of genuineness, credibility, trustworthiness, and how unfiltered the influencer is (Malik et al., 2016). This

authentic connection forged between an influencer and her/his followers can, in turn, be leveraged by brands desirous of building authentic relationships with their target audiences. Perceptions of authenticity across literature are often examined in the context of disclosures of paid posts or with specific reference to a particular promotion (e.g., Li and Feng, 2022; Karagur et al., 2022). However, we observe across our interactions that authenticity is perceived along multiple levels, and can impact the relationship between exposure to influencer content, self-discrepancies and behaviors. For instance, on a more visible level, specific brand posts are judged by consumers for how unbiased or holistic the views expressed by the influencer are. At a more fundamental level, however, participants report carefully examining the truth value of the content that is shared by an influencer, in terms of how holistic and unbiased the influencer's profile and content are, and the extent to which the influencer's virtual self is representative of his actual self.

Notably, participants report that their judgments and behaviors towards an influencer's recommendations depend on the extent to which they believe the influencer is telling the truth, both about the product/brand as well his/her own experiences with it. In general, participants share their misgivings about sponsored content and how they are likely to negatively evaluate the influencer as well as the endorsed brand if they identify it as sponsored content. At the same time, others share that even if a post is sponsored, they are likely to cut the influencer some slack, especially because they perceive that influencers need to present an authentic self if they are to gain and retain followers. At the same time, they carefully examine whether the influencer is biased towards the product in conjunction with their perceptions of how authentic the influencer is in general. Such perceptions of authenticity are developed over time and play an important role in driving behavioral responses towards influencer promotions.

Our observation that influencers are perceived as ideals or standards for comparison is similar to discussions elsewhere in the literature where influencers are described as opinion leaders or role models (e.g., Levin, 2020; de Cicco et al., 2020), but we add nuance to this understanding by situating it in the context of the nature of the influencer-follower relationship, and the implications of exposure to influencer content on an individual's self-concept. For instance, most respondents across our sample discuss how they have been a part of the influencer's "journey" and how they have actively consumed the detailed and meticulous documentation of the influencer's experiences over a period. Individuals reported engaging more with such influencers by actively talking to them through personal messages to share their concerns and seeking the influencer's help, in a reciprocal and highly engaged relationship. While several studies describe the relationship between users and influencers as akin to para-social interactions, or an illusionary albeit one-sided relationship between followers and a media persona (e.g., Jin and Ryu, 2020; Kim, 2022), there is emerging evidence to suggest that such a relationship may be more reciprocal, premised on mutual exchange and co-creation of value (Lou and Hudders, 2022). We examined this inconsistency by exploring the nature of the influencer follower relationship and interpretations of engagement, especially with respect to the approaches employed by individuals for seeking assistance in addressing inconsistencies between the domains of the self. Participants from our sample reported a more egalitarian and reciprocal or two-way relationship coupled with more active forms of engagement, which is similar to the findings of Lou and Hudders (2022), who label the close relationships built by influencers with

their followers as trans-social, instead of the typically held notion of such relationships as parasocial.

Our study also presents a more nuanced understanding of engagement which has been conceptualized in multiple ways across the literature, most commonly being interpreted at lower levels of activity like consuming the content or the number of likes or comments. We argue for treating it as a multi-level construct that encompasses content consumption and sharing, and value co-creation. This is similar to the findings of Schivinski et al. (2016), who draw from the work of Shao et al. (2009), in the context of engagement with brand-related social media content. They argue for engagement to be treated as a multi-dimensional construct encompassing consumption, contribution and creation of content related to the brand. Individuals consume influencer content by seeking or watching their posts. Contribution takes place in the form of interactions with the influencer and their content as well as interactions with others (like peers) about the influencer or their content. At a higher level of engagement, individuals create content that is influenced by exposure to influencers, and may, at times, include collaborations with the influencers themselves (for example, the Remix functionality on Instagram allows users to combine their own video reels with those shared by other users, and several influencers use this interactive feature to create content templates and invite followers to create collaborative content). User generated content that is inspired by or co-created with influencers is a common feature of the social media landscape, and our study offers evidence for theory and practice to account for engagement as a multilevel construct comprising content consumption, contribution and creation.

Implications

Thus, by examining the impact of exposure to influencer marketing on consumer behavior with reference to its impact on an individual's actual and ideal self, our study makes one of several contributions. To our knowledge, this is one of the first studies that examine the impact of exposure to influencer content on an individual's self-discrepancy, especially in treating self-discrepancy as a state rather than a trait variable, and in identifying positive affect as a potential outcome of experiencing self-discrepancy with a target perceived as more attainable and realistic. The merit of these observations can be augmented with reference to the evidence available across the literature on the impact of self-discrepancy and the resulting affect on consumption behavior. For instance, some studies report how affect such as shame, guilt or irritability, as well as inspiration, joy and curiosity arising out of comparing oneself to others can result in sharing knowledge or adoption of behaviors of others (e.g., Landis et al., 2009; Ki et al., 2020, 2022). In addition, we situate these understandings in connection with perceptions of homophily and authenticity associated with an influencer. The two constructs are increasingly being discussed in the influencer marketing literature, and we contribute to the theory by examining their implications for an individual's meaning-making processes surrounding their self-concept in the influencer marketing context. Our study contributes to extant understandings of perceived homophily and authenticity by observing how individuals develop and maintain such perceptions, and their implications for consumer behavior arising out of a need to address self-discrepancies, which can, in turn, inform managerial decision-making in favor of influencers perceived as more homophilic and authentic, not just in terms of their recommendations and content, but on a fundamental level of the perceived homophily and authenticity that an

individual ascribes to their virtual self as a whole. Further, as the first study to document the role played by mindfulness and self-acceptance in shaping an individual's affective responses to experiencing a discrepancy, we also open the discussion on making influencer marketing an exercise that takes into account consumer wellbeing. The presence of both negative as well as positive affect upon experiencing a gap between one's actual and ideal self presents both challenges and opportunities, and in mindfulness and self-acceptance, we find the potential for developing strategies and recommendations that shape consumer behaviors from more positive affective experiences.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Given its relative newness as a consumer context, influencer marketing presents a fertile ground for developing and examining theories and relationships, and at the same time, presents practitioners with a novel approach for reaching out to consumers. However, the lack of extant knowledge on this emerging approach for marketing presents a challenge in terms of defining and examining the extent of potential explanations or phenomena that underlie its effectiveness. In the present study, we focus on examining a specific aspect of influencer marketing - its ability to shape consumer behavior by impacting an individual's self-concept and resulting in comparisons between one's ideal and actual self, or self-discrepancies. Naturally, while we try to cover multiple dimensions and facets of this linkage, our study possesses several limitations. For instance, a limitation of our research is common across the methodological choice of qualitative research in marketing – while our sample focusses on information-rich cases from the most important demographic that consumes influencer content, and the methodology allows us to deep-dive into personal experiences related to the self-concept, our findings can be triangulated with causal analysis using experiments or large-scale data collection on and analysis of proposed linkages. Future studies can also add to this body of literature by examining each emerging theme and variable in greater detail. For instance, what factors can shape mindfulness and self-acceptance, and to what extent can marketers or influencers aid in this process and contribute to consumer well-being? Other studies can examine how these variables are more active in some individuals and less active in others, such as what differentiates more mindful individuals from less mindful individuals, and whether these factors can be externally enhanced through interventions such as influencer-issued reminders or disclaimers to their viewers for being more mindful of their time, thoughts, actions etc. Similarly, perceived authenticity can be related to both the influencer as well as their content, and future studies can examine how these two sub-domains can be developed or challenged, and the implications of the same for consumer behavior and marketing. Similarly, while we present the relevance of developing an understanding of self-presentation driven by exposure to influencers on virtual platforms, future studies can examine conditions under which making altered identity claims can be viewed as favorable for a consumer's well-being, such as through creative self-expression, and where it may negatively impact consumer well-being such as inauthentic self-presentation driven by experiences of pressure to conform to social ideals, resulting in unhealthy or financially straining consumption patterns, especially in the case of young adults and vulnerable social groups.

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