

Me, Myself, and Influencers

Examining the impact of social media influencers on offline and virtual self-discrepancies and consumer behaviours in offline and virtual spaces.

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Introduction

An average individual spends about 2 hours 27 minutes on social media platforms per day, and this number is much higher for emerging markets with a large youth demographic and increasing internet penetration across handheld devices (Buccholz, 2022). With most, if not all, social interactions and exchanges transpiring on social media platforms, an individual's experiences online should be experienced just as strongly, if not more, as offline experiences. This is particularly true in the case of exposure to influencer marketing and influencer-generated content - research increasingly identifies the crucial role played by influencers in shaping their followers' choices and behaviors by offering recommendations, information, and knowledge, and by serving as role models or identity exemplars of what is appreciated in that given space (Solomon, 2020; de Castro et al., 2021). Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers are regular social media users who have been able to reach larger audiences, albeit around a niche area of expertise, and are assumed to be prominent voices, opinion leaders, or tastemakers of the platform (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Influencer marketing allows reaching out to and influencing specific targets through individuals with expertise in the brand or category space, and this is driven by the relationship between the influencer and their followers (Ewers, 2017). By demonstrating how to use specific brands and products and posting recent trends in their respective fields, influencers are individuals who have built large, engaging and stable follower bases and can significantly impact the purchase decisions of their followers (de Veirman et al., 2017).

As a result, social media influencers have become highly sought-after agents for promoting brands and engaging with consumers (Almeida, 2018). For instance, according to the Influencer Marketing Hub (2022), 83% of Instagram's users turn to it when they want more information about a new brand or product, and over 87% of its users follow up on exposures to brands and products on Instagram with behavioral responses, such as virtually visiting a brand's social media page or purchasing their products online. When contextualized with reference to high consumer resistance to traditional forms of advertising, influencer marketing is increasingly regarded as a rewarding and promising alternative to traditional forms of branding and promotions (Levin, 2020; State of Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report, 2022).

It is of little surprise, then, that there has been a surge in academic and managerial interest in influencer marketing and its implications for consumer behavior. Despite rapid advancement in our understanding of influencer marketing, however, there is a pressing need for studies that examine the causal pathways and variables that enhance or diminish the effectiveness of influencer marketing, as well as how individuals make sense of and respond to consistent exposure to such content. Scholars (e.g., Huang et al., 2019; Ahadzadeh et al., 2017) reason that the way individuals think about and reveal themselves has significantly changed with the onset and rapid penetration of social media. In particular, a line of inquiry set forth by Dunn and Guadagno (2012) may be relevant in the context of social media usage and exposure to other users like influencers. They question that while the integration of computers in contemporary society may have changed the way people engage and communicate with others, could this also have changed people and the way they thought about themselves? Similarly, while influencer marketing is increasingly viewed as an important and commonly experienced aspect of an individual's social media experiences, could there be an impact of continuous exposure to influencer marketing and content on the individuals themselves?

This is an important albeit lesser explored line of inquiry in the literature on influencer marketing – can continuous exposure to social media ideals result in comparing one’s self-concept and the ideal displayed by others like influencers, as well as an internalization of these ideals over time? (Radecke, 2021; Twomey and O’Reilly, 2017). In other words, social media platforms can act as salient spaces for engaging in social comparisons with other social media users, given that, unlike real-world social spaces, individuals now have unlimited access to a flow of edited photos, videos and information from celebrities, influencers and peers, which can result in greater exposure to, as well as the creation of ideal standards that are appreciated and admired by a large body of ‘followers’ or ‘subscribers’ (Ho et al., 2016). Notably, given the deep embeddedness of social media exchanges in an individual’s day-to-day life, individuals may tend to infer meanings of what is considered desirable versus undesirable or more versus less likeable based on what they see on social media (Dunn and Guadagno, 2012; Hu et al., 2022). Comparing oneself to these externally imposed and individually or socially internalized ideals can lead to an identification of a gap between the domains of the self-concept, or a self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987).

An emerging body of literature examines how self-discrepancies in a traditional sense, that is, the gap between the actual and ideal self (Higgins, 1987), can impact individuals’ behaviors and intentions for online and offline self-presentation. Research documents how consumption behaviors like acquiring the products possessed by an individual who embodies one’s ideal self (e.g., clothing and fashion purchases, luxury items, beauty products etc.) or by consuming similar experiences (such as travel, food blogging, adventure sports etc.) are used as compensatory mechanisms aimed at reducing self-discrepancies, or indicating compliance with what is deemed a social standard (e.g., Lanz et al., 2018; Ranzini and Lutz, 2017; Jang et al., 2016). At the same time, most such studies (e.g., Aw and Chuah, 2021) treat self-discrepancy as a trait variable – they do not account for the possibility of an impact of exposure to influencers on an individual’s self-evaluations shaped by stimuli perceived as an ideal by a large body of followers (Hu et al., 2022). The present study seeks to fill this gap by examining if and how self-discrepancies may arise as an outcome of exposure to influencers’ content versus non-influencer content (e.g., content shared by regular users, brands, etc.) and the impact of such discrepancies on an individual’s intentions and behaviors.

In addition, the operationalization of self-discrepancy across extant studies focuses on comparisons individuals make between the domains of their self-concept, presupposing the individual’s self-concept as experienced in an offline-sense as a variable of interest. At the same time, the online or virtual space, while it shares several commonalities with the real or offline world, has certain attributes that can distinguish the way in which individuals define and interpret their self-concept with respect to others in *that space itself*. While an individual’s virtual self, or the “configuration of the defining characteristics of a person in a virtual space” (Suh et al., 2013), may share commonalities with an individual’s real-world actual self, the two may not necessarily overlap. For instance, Ho et al. (2016) argue that, unlike real-world presentation, individuals can engage in more consistent self-presentation and self-promotion on social media platforms, such as by uploading selfies that have been taken with a view to present only the best attributes of the individuals, simultaneously downplaying the negative attributes. This can have significant implications – on the one hand, not only might individuals end up comparing their actual real-world self with influencers, but they may also compare their virtual self-presentation with the influencer or other social media users’ virtual self (DeVito et al., 2017). In turn, an individual may use mechanisms like consumption behavior to signal an alignment with their ideal self, as defined by the influencers or notable social media users, in the form of a compensatory response to an

experienced self-discrepancy. At the same time, however, there are no studies that examine the experience and impact of virtual self-discrepancies arising out of exposure to virtual ideals and the individual's subsequent behaviors and intentions, a gap which the present study seeks to examine.

Notably, the provision for altering one's online self could be liberating and allow for greater self-expression. For instance, it has been documented that individuals tend to feel less pressured by social and cultural norms on social media platforms, given the diversity of content shared by users from multiple cultures and societies, and perceive lower levels of surveillance (Hu et al., 2022). Self-expression on social media platforms has been associated with identity expression and development, such that individuals report ease (as opposed to experiences in real-world social spaces) in expressing or exploring their identities and forging communities, which may or may not carry over to their offline self (Spies Shapiro and Margolin, 2014).

At the same time, it could also lead to situations where the gap between one's actual and ideal self becomes so high that it creates psychological pressures, which may only worsen over repeated iterations of such altered and enhanced self-presentations (Suh et al., 2013). As a result, consumers may be driven towards inauthentic self-presentation, which misleads others about the individual and their virtual self and can create unreal standards of comparison. This is particularly salient in the case of exposure to influencers, especially when one takes into account their impact on consumer choice and decision-making, but there is limited research that examines the link between exposure, self-discrepancies and the need for self-enhancement of one's virtual self through behaviors like consumption and usage of affordances like filters and other editing options.

The present study seeks to examine how individuals respond to exposure to influencer content, its impact on offline or traditional as well as online or virtual self-discrepancies, the desire to learn more about or the intention to follow influencer's recommendations, and consumption intentions and behaviors. In addition, we also examine the similarities and differences between such consumption for virtual and offline self-presentation and contribute to the extant literature in one of several ways. By examining the causal pathways through which influencers can effectively shape consumer responses, we add to the managerial know-how surrounding influencer marketing. We explore this with reference to a new brand and find that influencer endorsements are likely to shape a greater desire to learn more about the new brand than traditional brand posts, thereby indicating the potential of influencers for impacting consumer behavior. This may, in turn, be indicative of the argument across literature that influencers are viewed as reliable sources of information, and the perceptions of expertise or value ascribed to an influencer may carry over from the influencer to the brand itself. We also find evidence that this effect was greater for individuals who perceived a larger gap between their ideal and actual self, which in turn varied as we exposed participants to influencers versus brand models. This is because exposure to a social media ideal that is both desirable and achievable and, at the same time, is perceived as more credible or authentic, can have a more powerful and profound impact on how an individual defines her/his ideal self, as compared to exposure to unrealistic or unachievable targets.

In addition, by examining the specific impact of virtual self-discrepancies on consumer behavior in both offline and online spaces, we make two key contributions – we are the first study that examines, in particular, how virtual self-discrepancies arise out of exposure to influencers versus regular social media users, such that while one's ideal self may not be

similar to or shaped by one's perceptions of a regular social media user, we find that individuals consistently treat influencers as equivalent to their ideal virtual self, thus rendering support to the argument that influencers are perceived as social media ideals.

Secondly, we note that virtual self-discrepancies impact an individual's behavior for both actual as well as virtual consumption, but there are significant differences between the two. Following exposure to influencer content, participants indicate a higher purchase intent for virtual self-presentation. While on the one hand, individuals may use consumption to engage in self-presentation behaviors aimed at reducing virtual self-discrepancies, modification of one's self-presentation efforts may also lead to inauthentic and misleading profiles, as well as unrealistic standards of comparisons for other users. As a result, and in case the gap between the individual's ideal and actual virtual self becomes too large, the individual may experience the need to engage more vociferously in consumption as a compensatory response. It may create excessive pressure on individuals to comply with these newly imposed and internalized standards, thus causing psychological distress and overspending on signaling consumption.

Thus, there are both managerial and welfare implications that warrant such a study, and to that end, we conduct two experiments with a sample aged 19-22 years, the demographic that comprises the largest share of social media users. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows – we begin with a review of the literature and formulation of hypotheses, followed by two experiments that examine the literature gaps as identified in the preceding and subsequent discussion. This is followed by the results and discussion section, including the contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

Review of Literature

Social media influencers, self-discrepancy, and consumer behavior

The self-concept can be understood as a dynamic or malleable entity that includes multiple dimensions, which may be shaped by or may assume different degrees of salience, depending upon an individual and their social contexts (Higgins, 1987; Markus and Kunda, 1986). According to the self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), disparities may exist between the multiple domains of the self-concept, or attributes or behaviors possessed by an individual or their actual (or real) self and those attributes the individual would like to possess (ideal self). Such disparities, also known as self-discrepancies, may arise upon comparing oneself with an ideal self, which may be internally or externally defined, from one's own point of view or from that of significant others or society at large (Mandel et al., 2017).

What is important to note here is that individuals tend to attribute greater salience to or internalize the attributes of notable others in their social space as an ideal, and may experience a self-discrepancy upon comparing their actual self with this newly defined ideal self. Bessenoff (2006) argues that individuals tend to internalize the behaviors or attributes of others as essential elements of their ideal self, when the other person's lifestyle is made salient or perceived as a standard by a large number of individuals. Similarly, Gils and Horton (2019) argue that individuals tend to align themselves with an ideal self that is defined by standards established in a community. This is all the more relevant in the case of social media platforms where one can form impressions of others based on their profile and activities, and use virtual cues to make assumptions about their actual lives. Similar to real-world interactions, participating in social media interactions can present individuals with the

need to conform to social ideals (Twomey and O'Reilly, 2017; Jackson and Luchner, 2018). As social acceptability and desirability can form key motivations for participating in virtual social exchanges, individuals may seek to learn or intend to imitate the behaviors of others who have successfully amassed appreciation and admiration from a large body of followers and, in turn, may internalize these attributes as relevant dimensions of their ideal self-concept (Jin et al., 2017; Ki et al., 2022). This is particularly relevant in the case of exposure to social media influencers, who can serve the role of identity exemplars for their followers as well as social media users in general (Lovelock, 2017). Their influence can be related to a range of specializations or niche in fields like fashion, home decoration, cooking, or fitness, and they define what attributes can constitute social acceptability, admirability and desirability (Van Norel et al., 2014; Cohen, 2018). As a result, influencers have emerged as individuals who set social standards, are often treated as ideals by other users of the platforms and are increasingly considered "trusted tastemakers" or opinion leaders (Levin, 2020; Cicco et al., 2020).

Extant literature further offers evidence for psychological, affective, and cognitive impacts of self-discrepancy, which may, in turn, produce a drive to reduce such a discrepancy (e.g., Scheier and Carver, 1990; Sela and Shiv, 2009). This drive can manifest in an individual's efforts to reduce the gap by utilizing compensatory mechanisms, such as consumption and purchase behavior, directed towards attaining one's ideal self by imitating others who typify their ideal (Jin et al., 2017; Arnocky et al., 2015; Hu et al., 2022). Similarly, on comparing the ideal self defined by exposure to influencers with one's actual self, an individual may experience self-discrepancy and a desire to reduce this gap by adopting the behaviors of the exemplar (Mandel et al., 2017).

At this point, it is important to note that an individual's intention to follow an influencer may originally be motivated by their desire to learn from or seek the recommendations of these niche or category experts on what products to consume or what practices one could adopt in order to either achieve or signal compliance with the social standards set by the influencer space and that the individual has internalized as essential to their ideal self. This is because individuals follow influencers to consume informative content about a particular niche. Experiencing a discrepancy upon comparing oneself with an ideal self that is similar to the influencer is overlapped by perceptions of the influencer as a valuable and trustworthy source of solutions. Thus, while exposure to influencer content and comparing one's actual self with the influencer can create self-discrepancies, the motivation to reduce such a gap can, in turn, direct the individual to engage with the influencer for solving their problem and seeking advice to implement in their real-life experiences. Such a dependency is, in turn, driven by perceptions of the source of information as relevant to achieving an ideal, in this case, as exemplified by the influencer themselves (Jimenez Castilo and Sanchez Fernandez, 2019; Ball-Rokeach, 1985).

In other words, not only can influencers serve as references for guiding their followers' self-perceptions, but they are also viewed as important sources of input for problem-solving and addressing the needs of their followers, as experienced in their real-world lives. Bao and Chang (2014) refer to this connection as a dependency relationship—they argue that followers depend on influencers as online resources of reliable and useful information that can help guide personal actions and shape decisions. As a result, individuals may, in turn, interact with influencers and seek their recommendations for resolving the very same discrepancy that they generated in the first place. Such engagement may manifest in the form of a desire to learn more about what the influencer does to sustain their place as a social standard. Given that

consumer behavior is a common response to such an experience of a self-discrepancy (e.g., Jin and Muqaddam, 2017; Ahadzadeh et al., 2017), we argue that such a response will be influenced by the degree of self-discrepancy experienced by an individual, which in turn will shape their desire to seek specific information about the products and brands used by the influencer, therefor engaging not only with the influencer but with the brands and products they promote as well (e.g., Ki et al., 2020). Such a desire to learn more about an influencer's used/endorsed brands can, in turn, shape intentions to consume that product, or in other words, shape the purchase intent of the consumer in favor of the brands and products endorsed by the influencer. Based on the preceding discussion, we formulate the following set of hypotheses:

H1: Exposure to influencer content leads to greater intent to purchase the product or brand recommended by the influencer.

H2: Exposure to influencer content (versus non-influencer content) leads to greater self-discrepancy.

H3: Exposure to influencer content (versus non-influencer content) leads to a greater desire to learn more about the product or brand recommended by the influencer.

H4: The impact of exposure to influencer content on purchase intent is serially mediated by self-discrepancy first, followed by the desire to learn more.

Virtual self-presentation, virtual-influencer self-discrepancies, and consumer behavior

In addition, the dramatic increase in the number of social exchanges that have become exclusively online underscores the importance of extending our current understandings of the self-concept beyond its traditional interpretation with reference to the real physical world to its manifestation as the virtual self in the coexisting dimension of the online space. Much of the discussion on the virtual self, which borrows from the phenomenon of avatar construction in virtual communities, dating platforms and online games (e.g., Belisle and Bodur, 2010), contends that the various forms of virtual self-presentation are a means for individuals to present themselves to others in virtual spaces, and allow them to make identity claims. These identity claims, defined as “symbolic statements made by individuals about how they would like to be regarded” (Vazire and Gosling, 2004, p. 124) can be self-directed or may serve as messages and signals to others.

Further, it has been argued that social media platforms can be interpreted as a public space that coexists but may not necessarily overlap with the real world. As DeVito et al. (2017) argue, there are key differences between online and offline spaces that can differentially shape an individual's notions of the domains of their self-concept and their self-presentation needs and efforts. According to the self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1959), self-presentation can be understood as the effort put in by individuals to create, modify or maintain a self-image that can convey information about oneself to others. This presentation, which may or may not be authentic, is regarded as an important and highly common activity across the social media usage of individuals (van der Schyff et al., 2022; Twomey and O'Reilly, 2017; Radecke et al., 2021). Now, while modifying one's physical attributes to construct an ideal identity claim may be costly or infeasible in the real world, social media platforms allow for a host of transformations that an individual can use to construct a profile

that is in greater alignment with their ideal self. Similarly, social media affordances such as likes, comments and reactions allow individuals to receive immediate feedback on their self-expression through their social media profiles (Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019). Such cues about the social desirability of one's social media profile can be utilized by consumers to actively present a virtual self that aligns with an ideal self, which may, in turn, be shaped by internalized social standards across such platforms (Mandel et al., 2017; van der Schyff et al., 2022). As a result, while virtual representations of one's self-concept may, to a large extent, be close to an individual's actual offline self, there may be significant differences between the two. Depending upon the space in which the self-concept is being experienced or expressed, individuals' actual and ideal self-concepts, as well as their self-presentation needs and efforts, may be different.

In particular, individuals can seek to align their ideal self with social media standards that they associate with influencers, given the influencers' opinion leadership or large follower bases that make them popular social media users. As discussed earlier, individuals may internalize social media standards as defined by influencers as their ideal self, or in other words, may utilize attributes of the influencer's virtual self to define their ideal self (Chua and Chang, 2016). For instance, upon comparing one's actual self with an influencer who is perceived as attractive by other users of that platform, individuals may experience the need to present a self-concept that is more attractive (Messinger et al. 2019; Vasalou et al., 2008; Hancock, Toma, and Ellison, 2007). Comparing one's actual self with an influencer's virtual self can, in turn, result in directing one's self-presentation efforts to align with the socially defined and individually internalized ideal, and individuals may do so by imitating the influencer and his/her choices and behaviors.

Thus, in addition to comparing one's actual self with an influencer's social media profile, individuals may also engage in comparisons of their own social media profiles or their virtual self with the self-presentation of the influencer, and experience what we refer to as a virtual self-discrepancy. The outcome of experiencing a gap between one's social media profile or the virtual self, and an ideal self, for instance, as exemplified by an influencer, can align with one of two directions – self-verification or self-enhancement. The former, as explained by the self-verification theory, implies that an individual would choose to maintain a consistent self-concept that reflects their actual self, in a move to ensure self-congruence and seek accurate feedback, which in turn can allow them to reduce the psychological weight associated with interpersonal anarchy (Swann et al., 1989; Messinger et al., 2019). At the same time, and as Schau and Gilly (2003) argue, individuals may be motivated to engage in self-presentation efforts driven by a need for self-enhancement (Kaplan, 1975), such that individuals who hold negative views arising out of an appraisal of their self-concept with an ideal may use self-presentation as a compensatory mechanism (Brown et al., 1988; Messinger et al., 2019).

For instance, experiencing a self-discrepancy arising out of comparing one's ideal and actual self can lead to an increase in the individual's engagement with the social communities or individuals that typify his/her ideal self and can shape their intentions to replicate the choices and behaviors of such ideals by following their recommendations (e.g., Kamboj et al., 2018). Now while comparisons and self-discrepancies may be experienced with a range of social media users, Casalo et al. (2020) contend that not only should such a discrepancy be experienced more powerfully in the case of comparing oneself with an achievable standard as embodied by the influencer, but it should also be particularly influential on an individual's behaviors. As has been documented in the literature, consumers tend to follow, account for, and put into practice the suggestions made by others who they perceive as opinion leaders

(Turcotte et al., 2015). Given that influencers are perceived as opinion leaders and experts in their niche categories, individuals have a higher tendency to seek their views on products and services, and to follow their advice and recommendations (Casalo et al., 2020). This intention to follow the influencer's advice can, in turn, have a bearing on an individual's intentions, such as the intention to purchase the products endorsed by the opinion leader, in this case, the influencer (Arnocky et al., 2015; Hu et al., 2022).

This is particularly relevant in the case of constructions and expressions of the virtual self, given that quite a lot of the communication on social media platforms takes place through symbolism and signaling, an essential part of which is an individual's consumption (Zhou et al., 2008). Thus, the inherent cultural meaning of goods can assume an essential role in the communication process, and this may or may not be different for self-presentation on social media platforms versus the offline space. Much like real-life consumption, virtual consumption can be interpreted as people consuming products and brands that allow them to communicate a desired identity or a self-image (Khaldi, 2014). As a result, individuals may be motivated to present a self-concept that is more aligned with their virtual ideal by following the influencer, which can, in turn, shape the purchase intent for those products for consumption in the virtual space.

Now, while extant literature documents how actual-ideal self-discrepancies can result in consumption behaviors directed at attempting to imitate the exemplar, there is limited evidence of how a gap between one's virtual domains of the self-concept can impact consumption for two different social spaces – the online and the offline world. In addition, there is a lack of research that examines the extent to which a virtual discrepancy is likely to affect an individual - whether the intentional and behavioral outcomes of virtual self-discrepancy would be limited to self-expression in the virtual space, or would they extend to actual-real life consumption, remains to be ascertained. In addition, there may be differences in the norms and ideals across the two coexisting social spaces, such that what may constitute as acceptable and appropriate consumption in the virtual space may not be treated as such in the offline space. As a result, there may be differences between consumer behavior for virtual and actual consumption aimed at self-presentation. For example, while physical world communications may prevent the individual from presenting a self-concept as per their wish because of the individual's corporal body, including physical characteristics like race, looks, and gender, the individual's social background, and the prevailing cultural norms of the community these constraints are significantly reduced in online platforms, thereby lending conceptual support to the hypothesis that there may be differences in how individuals respond to self-discrepancies for offline and online self-presentation (Hu et al., 2020).

Based on the preceding discussion, we hypothesize that:

H5: Exposure to influencer content (versus non-influencer content) leads to greater virtual self-discrepancy.

H6: Exposure to influencer content (versus non-influencer content) leads to greater intention to follow the influencer's advice for virtual (offline) self-presentation.

H7: Exposure to influencer content leads to greater purchase intent for the products used by the influencer for virtual (offline) self-presentation.

H8: The purchase intent for virtual self-presentation is significantly different from the purchase intent for offline self-presentation.

H9a(b): The impact of exposure to influencer content on purchase intent is serially mediated by self-discrepancy and intention to follow advice for virtual (offline) self-presentation.

In the next section, we examine our sets of hypotheses across two experiments. We first explore the implications of traditional interpretations of self-discrepancies arising out of exposure to influencer content on consumer behavior in general, followed by an examination of the impact of virtual self-discrepancies on consumer behavior in online and offline spaces.

Experiment 1

The first study was designed to test hypotheses H1 through H4. We examined the impact of exposure to influencer content on self-discrepancy, desire to learn more and purchase intent for a brand in the high-involvement category of skincare.

Design

We conducted a 2-level between-subjects experiment (brand endorsement post versus influencer endorsement post) with 80 female participants in the age group 19-22 ($M_{age} = 20.2$, $SD_{age} = 1.30$). The respondents were students enrolled in the undergraduate program at an Indian university.

Stimuli

The stimuli for the experiment were developed with three key considerations. First, in order to eliminate brand beliefs, knowledge or attitudes toward an existing brand which could have confounding effects, we created a new brand, Verité, for use in our experiment. This is similar to the approach used by Beuckels and de Jans (2022). Second, we used a high-involvement product category, skincare, to study the difference in consumer response to exposure to endorsements with influencers versus without influencers. We used skin care because it can act as a limiting case – the likelihood of an individual being influenced easily for products such as skincare is very low, especially for a new brand; hence a difference between responses to endorsements with influencers versus without can be highly insightful. Third, to eliminate the impact of preconceived notions of popular influencers, we developed two copies of a social media post for the new brand using a stock video of an attractive female who was perceived as equally likely to be an influencer or a model for the advertisement. Since we want to focus on measuring self-discrepancy when the target is perceived as an influencer versus an unknown ad model, we use the same video to isolate the impact of an individual being an influencer versus a non-influencer.

Pretesting

We used a stock video of a female using a skincare item to construct our stimuli. We pretested this video on its likelihood of being an influencer's post or an advertisement shared by a brand and observed across twenty respondents from the sampling frame that ten respondents judged it as a video that was shared by an influencer, nine evaluated it as a video from an ad for a brand, and one respondent was unsure.

We also pretested the caption used for constructing our social media post stimuli for the two conditions for informative quality, persuasiveness, and the likelihood of being posted by an influencer or a brand. Based on the ratings given by twenty respondents (ten were randomly allocated to the brand caption and ten to the influencer caption, without disclosing the source of the post), the two copies were rated equivalent on perceived informative value and persuasiveness ($p > 0.1$). Out of the ten respondents exposed to the influencer caption (the source of the post was not disclosed), all the respondents identified it as the caption taken from an influencer's post, and out of those exposed to the brand post, all but one identified it as a caption from a brand post, while one was unsure. Finally, we checked for the familiarity of the (non-existent) brand and the (not real) influencer and verified, based on a sample of twenty respondents, whether they had ever heard of the brand or seen the influencer before. All but one participant reported having never heard of the brand, whereas one responded with 'maybe.' All participants reported never having seen the female profile in the stimuli video.

Procedure

The experiment was conducted online on Qualtrics. The respondents were randomly assigned to two groups – the influencer endorsement condition and the brand endorsement condition. In both conditions, participants were told that a new skincare brand, Verité, has recently been launched in India, and they would be shown an Instagram about the brand. The first group was shown a post shared by an influencer on her profile, endorsing the brand Verité. The second group was shown an endorsement by the brand itself, as shared on its own social media page. We thus operationalized exposure to influencer content (versus non-influencer content) in the form of two groups varying on the source of content – shared by an influencer or not shared by an influencer but rather the brand. Participants were exposed to a video of a female using a skincare product from the (non-existent) brand Verité. In the brand endorsement condition, participants were shown an Instagram post comprising the stock video and a caption about the brand, posted by the brand on their social media profile on Instagram. In the influencer endorsement condition, participants were shown an Instagram post shared by an influencer, comprising the same video and a caption about the brand, but posted by the influencer on her own social media page. In the first condition, the individual in the video was not identified in specific, but in the second, the individual in the video was identified as the influencer herself. We also included the word “ad” in the influencer condition to ensure that the posts only differed in the source – endorsement post by an influencer versus by a brand. This is similar to the approach used by Wojdyski and Evans (2016) and Müller and Christandl (2019), who use the word “sponsored” to ensure that the stimuli are recognized as an advertisement.

After watching the post, participants were asked to record their responses to several questions about their desire to learn more about the endorsed brand, their intent to purchase the endorsed brand, and actual-ideal self-discrepancy. Participants also completed questions related to their involvement in the skincare category, age, and annual household income. Since self-discrepancy, especially related to one's body image and appearance, has been documented to be strongly influenced by gender (e.g., Kim and Kim, 2021), we included only those participants who identified as females.

Measures

All items were measured using established scales and operationalized as elsewhere in extant literature. Desire to learn more, purchase intent and category involvement were measured using 7-point scales (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).

Participants were asked to share their desire to learn more about the endorsed brand using the three-item scale by Jones and Reynolds (2006; $\alpha = 0.938$). Items included – “I would like to learn more about the brand Verité”, “Learning more about Verité would be useful”, and “I would like to know more about the brand Verité and its products.”

Purchase intent was measured using four items of the scale used by Evans et al. (2017). The items included – “I would like to try this brand”, “I would buy other products of this brand”, “I would buy this brand if I happened to see the brand in a store”, and “I would actively seek this brand in a store to purchase it” ($\alpha = 0.965$)

Self-discrepancy was operationalized in a manner similar to Jin and Muqaddam (2017) - participants were asked to think about and rate their ideal self on five items of the attractiveness scale by Ohanian (1991). Participants were presented with a semantic differential scale with five items – attractive/unattractive, classy/unclassy, sexy/not sexy, beautiful/ not beautiful, and elegant/not elegant. They were next asked to think about and rate their actual self on the same items. We took the difference of the scores on each of the five items between the ideal self and actual self-ratings, and the average of the difference of scores across the five items was used as a composite measure of self-discrepancy ($\alpha = 0.89$).

Category involvement was measured using the scale by Laurent and Kapferer (1985; from Mittal and Lee, 1988), where participants were asked to rate three items on a seven-point scale. Items included – “skincare products are very important to me”, “for me, skincare products matter”, and “skincare products are a very important part of my life” ($\alpha = 0.831$). Participants also answered questions related to their age and annual household income, which were used as control variables.

Results

Randomization

There were no significant differences between the samples across the two experimental conditions with respect to age ($t(78) = 1.29, p = 0.2$), income ($t(78) = 0.27, p = 0.78$) and product category involvement ($t(78) = 0.16, p = 0.87$). Category involvement was consistently high across the two conditions ($M = 5.44, SD = 0.699$).

Impact of influencer endorsement versus brand endorsement

Out of a sample of 80 female participants, 40 received the influencer endorsement, and 40 received the brand endorsement stimuli. Participants indicated a higher purchase intent for the new brand in the influencer endorsement condition ($M = 5.338, SD = 1.031$) than in the brand endorsement condition ($M = 2.781, SD = 1.054; t(78) = 10.961, p < 0.000$). Self-discrepancy was significantly higher in the influencer endorsement condition ($M = 1.53, SD = 0.493$) than the brand endorsement condition ($M = 0.6, SD = 0.382; t(78) = 9.43, p < 0.000$). Similarly, the desire to learn more was greater in the influencer endorsement condition ($M = 5.1, SD = 1.130$) than in the brand endorsement condition ($M = 2.66, SD = 1.019; t(78) = 10.144, p < 0.000$). Thus, H1, H2, H3 were supported.

Mediation analysis

Serial mediation analysis using the PROCESS SPSS Macro (Hayes, 2016; model 6, 5000 bootstrap samples) was conducted with the source of endorsement (coding 1 = influencer endorsement, 0 = brand endorsement) treated as the independent variable, actual-ideal self-discrepancy (M1) and desire to learn more (M2) as the mediators, and purchase intent as the dependent variable. The impact of the source of endorsement on self-discrepancy ($b = 0.67, t = 6.3522, p < 0.001$) as well as on the desire to learn more ($b = 0.6895, t = 3.4852, p < 0.001$) was significant. The impact of self-discrepancy on the desire to learn more was also significant ($b = 1.699, t = 9.7176, p < 0.001$). Source of endorsement ($b = 0.3814, t = 2.5595, p < 0.05$), self-discrepancy ($b = 0.6059, t = 3.2914, p < 0.005$) and desire to learn more ($b = 0.6869, t = 8.4655, p < 0.001$) were found to impact purchase intent significantly.

The indirect effect of the source on purchase intention mediated by self-discrepancy was significant ($b = 0.4056, SE = 1.93, 95\%CI = [0.0131, 0.8255]$), the indirect effect of exposure on purchase intention mediated by the desire to learn more ($b = 0.3212, SE = 3.14, 95\%CI = [0.2156, 0.8154]$). We further assessed the serial mediation effect with self-discrepancy and desire to learn more serially mediating the relationship between the source of endorsements and purchase intent, and the effect was found to be significant ($b = 0.7810, SE = 3.65, 95\%CI = [0.4009, 1.2330]$). The effect of control variables age, income and category involvement were insignificant ($p > 0.1$). Thus, H4 was supported. Tables 1a and b, and figure 1 summarize these results.

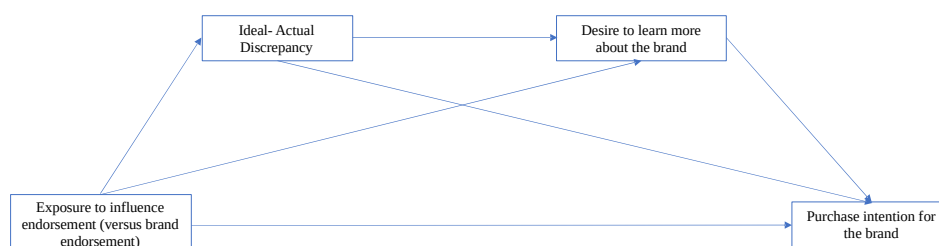
Table 1(a) - Main effects of source type on mediating and dependent variables-Experiment 1

	Brand endorsement	Influencer endorsement	
Purchase Intention	$M = 2.78, SD = 1.054$	$M = 5.34, SD = 1.031$	$t(78) = 10.96, p < 0.001$
Self-Discrepancy	$M = 0.60, SD = 0.383$	$M = 1.53, SD = 0.493$	$t(78) = 9.43, p < 0.001$
Desire to learn more	$M = 2.66, SD = 1.019$	$M = 5.10, SD = 1.130$	$t(78) = 8.48, p < 0.001$

Table 1(b) - Serial mediation results – Experiment 1

Total effect of Source à PI	Direct Effect Exposure à PI	Relationship	Indirect Effect	Confidence Interval		t-value	Conclusion
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
2.0416 ($p < 0.001$)	0.3814 ($p < 0.05$)	Source à Self Discrepancy à Desire to Learn More à Purchase Intent	0.781	0.9232	1.3690	3.651	Partial mediation

Figure 1- Serial mediation model for Experiment 1



Experiment 2

The second study was designed to test hypotheses H5 through H9. We examined the impact of exposure to influencer content (versus non-influencer content) on virtual self-discrepancy, intention to follow the influencer's advice for virtual and offline self-presentation, and purchase intent for virtual and offline self-presentation in the high involvement category of appearance-related consumption – including fashion, clothing and hair and makeup.

Design

We conducted a 2-level between-subjects experiment (exposure to social media influencer profile versus exposure to non-influencer social media user profile) with 81 female participants in the age group 19-22 ($M_{age} = 20.09$, $SD_{age} = 0.94$). The respondents were students enrolled in the undergraduate program at an Indian university.

Stimuli

Participants were randomly allocated to one of two experimental conditions. In both conditions, they were exposed to the profile of a social media user, which was judged in the pretesting as equally likely to be the profile of an influencer and an ordinary individual, with posts mainly focusing on appearance – makeup, fashion, and body image. The stimuli for the experiment were developed with three key considerations. In order to use the closest imitation of the real-world experience of watching an individual's Instagram profile, participants were shown a video recording of a browsing session of the social media profile - we recorded the Instagram screen on a mobile device and used that as our stimuli. The video was selected on the basis of pretesting and was approximately 34 seconds long in duration. Second, in order to eliminate pre-existing knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes toward a popular influencer, we used a lesser-known influencer's profile. Third, we used a high-involvement product category, appearance, to study the difference in consumer response to exposure to other social media users versus influencers as standards of the social media environment.

We also showed individuals two outfits worn by the influencer/user and asked them to indicate their intent to purchase this outfit for virtual or online self-presentation only, and real-world or offline self-presentation only. In other words, participants had to indicate their intention to purchase that outfit only for posting on social media (consuming for virtual self-presentation), and only for wearing in the offline world (consuming for real-world self-presentation). The outfits presented to the participants varied on social acceptability and appropriateness, to examine the plausibility of the theoretical argument that consumption behaviors for online and offline self-presentation may vary, such that what may be acceptable online may or may not be acceptable or appropriate offline and vice versa.

Pretesting

Twenty respondents from our sampling frame were presented with three video recordings of a browsing session of a social media user's profile and were asked to rate the video on how accurately it resembled their way of browsing social media profiles. Another pretest was done with 15 respondents who were shown all three videos and were asked to choose the video that most closely resembled how they would have browsed that profile. Incidentally, the video with the highest rating and frequency of being chosen was the same video across the two pretests, which was eventually used in the study. Twenty respondents were next presented with the social media profile recording selected from the previous pretest examination and were asked to indicate whether this was the profile of a regular social media user or a social media influencer. Ten participants identified the profile as that of an influencer, nine identified it as the profile of a regular social media user, and one participant was unsure. In addition, when the respondents were presented with the information that this was the profile of a social media influencer and asked whether this was likely to be true or not based on the profile they were shown, all participants confirmed that the profile they saw was of an influencer. Out of the other group who were presented with the instruction that this was the profile of a regular social media user and asked to rate whether this was likely to be true or false, all but one rated it as true, whereas the one rated it as false.

We also identified two outfits worn by the influencer, one of which could be considered more acceptable and appropriate for wearing in real-world scenarios, and the other could be considered less acceptable and appropriate for being worn in public in the offline space. To confirm this assumption, twenty respondents were presented with two outfits and were asked to rate each outfit on seven-point scales for acceptability and appropriateness of the outfit in offline spaces and real-world scenarios (items from scales by Vagias (2006)). There were significant differences between the rating of the less acceptable/appropriate ($M_{HAcc} = 5.3$, $SD_{HAcc} = 0.92$; $M_{HApp} = 5.35$, $SD_{HAcc} = 0.87$) and the more acceptable/appropriate outfit ($M_{LAcc} = 2.8$, $SD_{HAcc} = 0.69$; $t(38) = 10.07$; $p < 0.001$; $M_{Happ} = 2.81$, $SD_{HApp} = 0.62$; $t(38) = 10.66$; $p < 0.001$), thus confirming our assumption. In addition, participants were asked to rate each outfit on acceptability and appropriateness for wearing in the virtual space, and we found that the two outfits' ratings were not significantly different and were equally high for both ($p > 0.1$). We also controlled for the outfits' likeability such that there were no significant differences between the likeability of both outfits, and both received equally high ratings ($p > 0.1$). The two outfits were included in the final study for measuring purchase intent for virtual and offline self-presentation.

Procedure

The experiment was conducted online on Qualtrics. Participants were told that they would be shown a social media profile, and the stimuli were in the form of a video (duration = 34 seconds) of a social media profile of a female social media user with posts in the domains of hair and makeup, clothing, fashion and lifestyle, and fitness and body image. One group was instructed that this was the profile of a regular social media user (SMU), whereas the other group were instructed that they were being shown the profile of a social media influencer (SMI). As a result, the only difference between the two conditions was the knowledge that the individual whose profile was being shown to the respondent was an influencer or an ordinary social media user.

After watching the post, participants were asked to record their responses to several questions about their rating of the individual in the profile, their ratings of their ideal social media self,

and their rating of their actual social media profile on items measuring attractiveness (the detailed operationalization of self-discrepancy is discussed in the measures section), their intention to follow the choices of the individual in the stimuli in their offline and virtual self-presentation and their intent to purchase the outfits worn by the individual for consumption for their actual and virtual self-presentation. For purchase intent, we identified two outfits worn by the SMI/SMU that were pretested to be varying on social acceptability and appropriateness (one outfit was deemed more socially appropriate and acceptable to be worn in real-world scenarios as well as virtual scenarios, whereas the other was deemed to be unacceptable or inappropriate for real-world consumption but was rated as appropriate or acceptable for posting on social media). Our intent was to examine the overall impact of exposure to SMI/SMU on virtual self-discrepancy and their effect on consumer behavior for online/virtual as well as offline/real-world consumption.

Participants also completed questions related to their involvement in the appearance category, age and annual household income. Since self-discrepancy, especially related to one's body image and appearance, has been documented to be strongly influenced by gender (e.g., Kim and Kim, 2022), we included only those participants who identified as females.

Measures

All items were measured using established scales and operationalized as elsewhere in extant literature. Intention to Follow Advice, Purchase Intent and Category Involvement were measured using 7-point scales (1 = strongly disagree to 7 – strongly agree). Participants were asked to share their intention to follow the influencer's suggestions for their virtual/online self-presentation or their offline/real-world self-presentation using the four-item scale by Casalo et al. (2011). Items included – “I would feel comfortable dressing as shown in the pictures published on this influencer's account”, “I would not hesitate to take into account the suggestions about clothing I can find in the pictures published on this influencer's account”, “I would feel secure in following the suggestions about clothing made by this influencer” and “I would rely on the recommendations about clothing made by this influencer” ($\alpha_{\text{Virtual}} = 0.928$; $\alpha_{\text{Offline}} = 0.913$).

Purchase intent was measured using two items of the scale used by Evans et al. (2017). The items included – “I would like to try this outfit endorsed by the influencer for posting on my social media/ an actual real-world scenario” and “I would actively seek out the outfit shown by the influencer to purchase it for wearing it for posting on social media/ in an actual real-world scenario” ($\alpha_{\text{VirtualP1}} = 0.921$; $\alpha_{\text{VirtualP2}} = 0.938$; $\alpha_{\text{OfflineP1}} = 0.91$; $\alpha_{\text{OfflineP2}} = 0.934$). Category involvement was measured using the scale by Laurent and Kapferer (1985), where participants were asked to rate three items on a seven-point scale ($\alpha = 0.823$). Items included – “appearance-related products are very important to me”, “for me, appearance-related products do not matter”, and “appearance-related products are a very important part of my life.”

Self-discrepancy was operationalized in a manner similar to Jin and Muqaddam (2017) - participants were asked to rate the SMI or SMU, depending upon which group they were assigned to, on the five items of the attractiveness scale by Ohanian (1991). Participants were presented with a semantic differential scale with five items – attractive/unattractive, classy/unclassy, sexy/not sexy, beautiful/ not beautiful, and elegant/not elegant. They were next asked to think about their ideal social media self, how they would ideally like their social media profile to be, and rate that profile on the five items. Finally, they were asked to think about their actual social media profile, as it currently was, and rate it on the same five

items. We compared the scores to get a sense of the average rating given to the influencers, one's actual virtual self, and one's ideal virtual self ($\alpha = 0.842$). We used the average difference between the ideal and actual social media self-scores for each item as a composite measure of virtual self-discrepancy. Participants also answered questions related to their age and annual household income, which were used as control variables.

Results

Randomization

There were no significant differences between the samples across the two experimental conditions with respect to age ($t(79) = 1.35, p = 0.2$), income ($t(79) = 1.06, p = 0.29$), and category involvement ($t(79) = 0.416, p = 0.68$). Category involvement was consistently high across the two conditions ($M_{SMI} = 5.498, SD_{SMI} = 0.83$; $M_{SMU} = 5.408, SD_{SMU} = 0.7$; $M = 5.44, SD = 0.77$).

Impact of exposure to SMI versus SMU

Out of a sample of 81 female participants, 40 were randomly allocated to the SMU condition, and the rest were randomly allocated to the SMI condition. Overall, participants indicated a higher purchase intent in the social media influencer (SMI) ($M = 5.573, SD = 0.620$) than in the social media user (SMU) condition for virtual self-presentation ($M = 3.9685, SD = 0.877$; $t(79) = 9.520, p < 0.000$). Similarly, participants indicated a higher purchase intent in the social media influencer (SMI) ($M = 4.664, SD = 0.532$) than in the social media user (SMU) condition for offline self-presentation ($M = 3.194, SD = 0.433$; $t(79) = 13.62, p < 0.000$). Self-discrepancy was significantly higher in the SMI condition ($M = 1.805, SD = 0.321$) than the SMU condition ($M = 0.81, SD = 0.342$; $t(79) = 13.5, p < 0.000$). Intention to follow advice for virtual self-presentation was greater in the SMI condition ($M = 5.323, SD = 0.667$) than in the SMU condition ($M = 3.8, SD = 0.827$; $t(79) = 9.139, p < 0.000$). Similarly, the intention to follow advice for offline self-presentation was greater in the SMI condition ($M = 5.195, SD = 0.713$) than in the SMU condition ($M = 3.362, SD = 0.609$; $t(79) = 12.423, p < 0.000$). Thus, H5, H6 and H7 are supported.

Mediation analysis

Serial mediation analysis using the PROCESS SPSS Macro (Hayes, 2016; model 6, 5000 bootstrap samples) was conducted with the type of user (coding 1 = SMI, 0 = SMU) treated as the independent variable, virtual actual-ideal self-discrepancy (M1) and intention to follow advice for virtual self-presentation (M2) as the mediators, and purchase intent for virtual self-presentation as the dependent variable.

The impact of the type of user on self-discrepancy ($b = 0.91, t = 13.28, p < 0.001$) as well as on intention to follow advice for virtual self-presentation ($b = 0.56, t = 2.71, p < 0.01$) was significant. The impact of self-discrepancy on the intention to follow advice for virtual self-presentation was also significant ($b = 1.36, t = 7.86, p < 0.001$). Type of user ($b = 0.34, t = 2.79, p < 0.01$), self-discrepancy ($b = 0.65, t = 4.94, p < 0.001$) and intention to follow advice for virtual self-presentation ($b = 0.61, t = 9.37, p < 0.001$) were found to impact purchase intent for virtual self-presentation significantly. The indirect effect of the type of user on purchase intention for virtual self-presentation mediated by self-discrepancy was significant

($b = 0.65$, $SE = 0.207$, $95\%CI = [0.2451, 1.0486]$). The indirect effect of the type of user on purchase intention mediated by intention to follow advice for virtual self-presentation was also significant ($b = 0.3439$, $SE = 1.594$, $95\%CI = [0.0968, 0.7078]$). We assessed the serial mediation effect with self-discrepancy and intention to follow advice for virtual self-presentation serially mediating the relationship between the type of user and purchase intent for virtual self-presentation, and the effect was found to be significant ($b = 0.833$, $SE = 0.2119$, $95\%CI = [0.4736, 1.2864]$). Further, the effects of control variables age, income and category involvement were insignificant ($p > 0.1$). Thus, H9a was supported. Tables 2a and 2b and figure 2 summarize the findings.

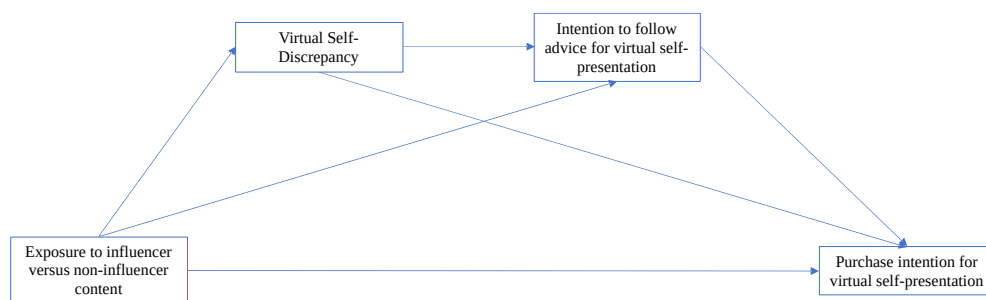
Table 2(a) - Main effects of source type on mediating and dependent variables for Virtual Self-Presentation

	SMI condition	SMU condition	
Self-Discrepancy	$M = 1.81, SD = 0.321$	$M = 0.81, SD = .0342$	$t(79) = 13.51, p < 0.001$
Intention to follow advice	$M = 5.32, SD = 0.667$	$M = 3.80, SD = 0.826$	$t(79) = 9.13, p < 0.001$
Purchase Intention	$M = 5.57, SD = 0.621$	$M = 3.97, SD = 0.877$	$t(79) = 9.520, p < 0.001$

Table 2(b) - Serial mediation results for Experiment 2 - Virtual Self-Presentation

Total effect of Source → PI	Direct Effect Exposure → PI	Relationship	Indirect Effect	Confidence Interval		t-value	Conclusion
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
2.1723 ($p < 0.001$)	0.3420 ($p < 0.01$)	Source → Virtual Self-Discrepancy → Intention _{VirtualSP} to Follow Advice → Purchase Intent _{VirtualSP}	0.8334	0.4736	1.2864	3.933	Partial mediation

Figure 2 - Serial mediation model for Experiment 2 - Virtual Self-Presentation



We conducted another serial mediation analysis (PROCESS model 6; Hayes, 2017; 5000 bootstrap samples) with the same independent variable and M1, but now with the intention to follow advice for offline self-presentation (M2) as the second mediator and purchase intention for offline self-presentation as the dependent variable. The impact of the type of user on self-discrepancy ($b = 0.91$, $t = 13.28$, $p < 0.001$) as well as on intention to follow advice for offline self-presentation ($b = 0.387$, $t = 2.04$, $p < 0.05$) was significant. The impact of self-discrepancy on the intention to follow advice for offline self-presentation was also

significant ($b = 1.43, t = 9.03, p < 0.001$). Type of user ($b = 0.404, t = 2.732, p < 0.01$), self-discrepancy ($b = 0.44, t = 2.533, p < 0.05$) and intention to follow advice for offline self-presentation ($b = 0.343, t = 3.914, p < 0.001$) were found to impact purchase intent for offline self-presentation significantly.

The indirect effect of the type of user on purchase intention for offline self-presentation mediated by self-discrepancy was significant ($b = 0.44, SE = 0.259, 95\%CI = [0.040, 0.9232]$). The indirect effect of the type of user on purchase intention mediated by intention to follow advice for offline self-presentation was borderline significant ($b = 0.133, SE = 0.091, 95\%CI = [0.00, 0.3522]$). We assessed the serial mediation effect with self-discrepancy and intention to follow advice for offline self-presentation serially mediating the relationship between the type of user and purchase intent for offline self-presentation, and the effect was found to be significant ($b = 0.491, SE = 0.196, 95\%CI = [0.1, 0.867]$). Further, the effects of control variables age, income and category involvement were insignificant ($p > 0.1$). Thus, H9b was supported. Tables 3a, 3b, and figure 3 summarize the findings.

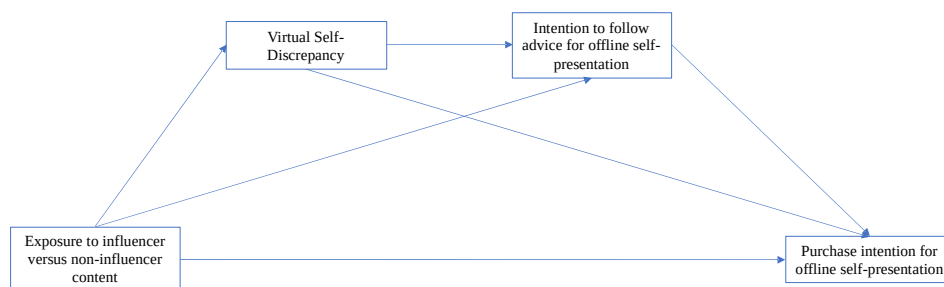
Table 3(a) - Main effects of source type on mediating and dependent variables for Offline Self-Presentation

	SMI condition	SMU condition	
Self-Discrepancy	$M = 1.81, SD = 0.321$	$M = 0.81, SD = 0.342$	$t(79) = 13.51, p < 0.001$
Intention to follow advice	$M = 5.19, SD = 0.713$	$M = 3.36, SD = 0.609$	$t(79) = 12.42, p < 0.001$
Purchase Intention	$M = 4.66, SD = .99$	$M = 3.19, SD = 0.877$	$t(79) = 9.520, p < 0.001$

Table 3(b) - Serial mediation results for Experiment 2 - Offline Self-Presentation

Total effect of Source \rightarrow PI	Direct Effect Exposure \rightarrow PI	Relationship	Indirect Effect	Confidence Interval		t-value	Conclusion
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
1.4669 ($p < 0.001$)	0.4037 ($p < 0.01$)	Source \rightarrow Virtual Self-Discrepancy \rightarrow Intention to Follow Advice \rightarrow Purchase Intent _{OfflineSP}	0.4906	0.0998	0.8667	2.461	Partial mediation

Figure 3 - Serial Mediation model for Experiment 2 - Offline Self-Presentation



Comparisons between purchase intent for online and offline self-presentation

We also analyzed the differences between the purchase intention for virtual and offline self-presentation, including a comparison between the two products that had been pretested as ranking very high and very low on social acceptability and appropriateness for wearing in the offline space but equivalently high acceptability and appropriateness for online spaces. We found support for H8 such that the differences between purchase intention for virtual and offline self-presentation were significantly different for both products across the two groups. Tables 4a and 4b, and figure 4 summarize these findings for offline versus virtual self-presentation for the two products.

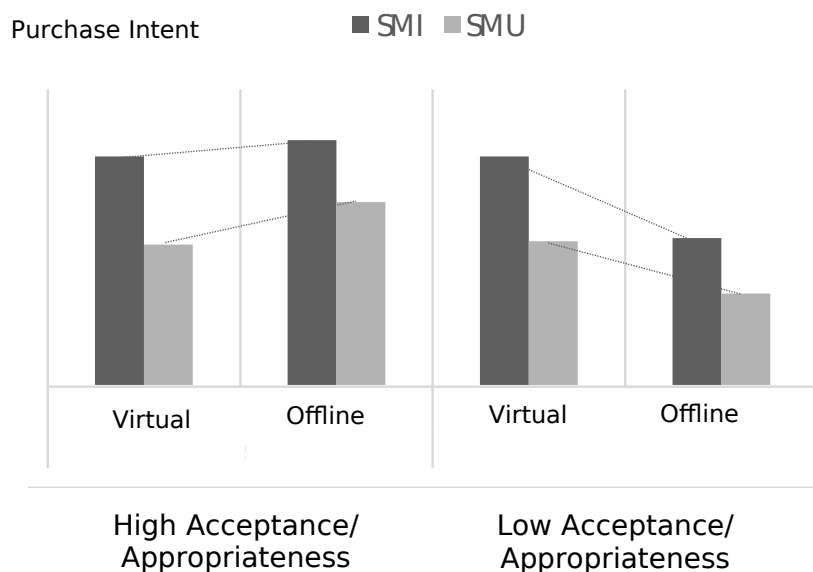
Table 4(a) – Purchase intent for High Acceptability/ Appropriateness Product

	SMI	SMU	
Virtual Self Presentation	<i>M</i> = 5.378, <i>SD</i> = 0.722	<i>M</i> = 3.363, <i>SD</i> = 0.620	<i>t</i> (79) = 13.456, <i>p</i> <0.001
Offline Self Presentation	<i>M</i> = 5.853, <i>SD</i> = 0.634	<i>M</i> = 4.287, <i>SD</i> = 0.619	<i>t</i> (79) = 11.237, <i>p</i> <0.001
	<i>t</i> (79) = 3.165, <i>p</i> <0.01	<i>t</i> (79) = 6.67, <i>p</i> <0.001	

Table 4(b) – Purchase intent for Low Acceptability/ Appropriateness Product

	SMI	SMU	
Virtual Self Presentation	<i>M</i> = 5.366, <i>SD</i> = 0.851	<i>M</i> = 3.025, <i>SD</i> = 0.946	<i>t</i> (79) = 11.703, <i>p</i> <0.001
Offline Self Presentation	<i>M</i> = 3.475, <i>SD</i> = 0.641	<i>M</i> = 2.1, <i>SD</i> = 0.534	<i>t</i> (79) = 10.476, <i>p</i> <0.001
	<i>t</i> (79) = 11.349, <i>p</i> <0.001	<i>t</i> (79) = 5.382, <i>p</i> <0.001	

Figure 4 - Purchase intent for Low Acceptability/ Appropriateness and High Acceptability/ Appropriateness Product across virtual and offline self-presentation – comparison between SMI and SMU



Discussion

In our first experiment, we examine the impact of exposure to influencer versus non-influencer content, operationalizing the latter as a brand post, and study how individuals respond to endorsements for brands shared by influencers versus brands. Across extant literature, there is some discussion on whether influencer endorsements are effective or not, based on the argument that in the instance where an individual recognizes that a post is an advertisement, consumer resistance may get activated, and consumers may respond unfavorably to such a post (Valor et al., 2017; Martikainen and Pitkänen, 2019). We document through empirical evidence how, that in contrast with advertisements shared by brands, content shared by influencers, even if it is in the form of a disclosed endorsement, is likely to be more effective, given that individuals perceive influencers as social standards, engage in comparisons with them, and at the same time, follow or associate with them a degree of expertise and sense of responsibility in making recommendations.

Further, while individuals report lower levels of self-discrepancy in the case of exposure to ad models, the self-discrepancy arising out of comparing one's actual self with one's ideal self is significantly higher following exposure to influencers. This observation merits further examination – an increase in the actual-ideal discrepancy could be attributed to the shaping or defining of an individual's ideal self in alignment with the influencer's virtual self, which in turn could lead to an increase in self-discrepancy. We examine this direction of inquiry in the next study, in that could exposure to influencers result in shaping one's ideal or actual selves differently from exposure to regular social media users, and what could be the potential outcomes of comparing one's online or virtual actual self and ideal self with an influencer.

In addition, we find that individuals in the influencer endorsement condition report a greater desire to learn more about the brand, an observation that sits well with the understanding that individuals follow influencers or associate with influencers a degree of knowledge and expertise about products or brands in their niche area. Thus, we note that self-discrepancy increases upon exposure to social media influencers, as does the desire to learn more about and the intent to purchase the products or brands recommended by the influencer. In addition, this process also follows a sequence such that exposure results in greater self-discrepancy, which leads to a greater desire to learn more about the products or brands recommended by the influencer in an attempt to reduce the discrepancy. This desire eventually shapes an individual's intent towards consuming such a product.

The fact that such an effect prevails even when the consumer has no knowledge about the brand and its products or the influencer herself, the product belongs to a very high involvement category, and the exposure is to an endorsement is compelling evidence for the effectiveness and value of influencer marketing – by merely utilizing an influencer to endorse the brand is sufficient to shape consumer behavior towards the brand in a favorable direction. This is especially relevant when contextualized with the extant knowledge about self-discrepancies – most studies treat self-discrepancy as a variable that interacts with exposure to influencer marketing and its impact on consumer behavior as a moderating force, whereas the fact that such exposure itself can lead to self-discrepancies highlights that not only does exposure affect the individual's behavior, but it does so by affecting the individual's self-concept and guides, and his or her desire to learn more about the brand in an attempt to reduce the self-discrepancy experienced.

In the second experiment, we situate these understandings in the specific context of an individual's virtual sense of the self-concept and examine how a virtual self-discrepancy may arise out of exposure to influencers and can, in turn, affect an individual's behaviors and intentions in virtual spaces. We also examine the extent to which such effects carry over to offline spaces and whether there are significant differences between the two. Given that increasingly many, if not all, social interactions transpire over social media platforms in the demographic we have chosen for the study, this is a pressing area worthy of examination, in that no extant research examines the impact of comparing one's virtual actual self with one's virtual ideal self. To our knowledge, we are the first study to examine the impact of exposure to influencer content on an individual's virtual self-discrepancy, and we study the impact of virtual self-discrepancies on the respondents' intention to follow the advice given by the influencer and her intention to purchase the products recommended by the influencer for virtual as well as offline self-presentation. Our results reveal how influencers, as opposed to regular users of Instagram that one may be exposed to, can lead to greater purchase intent for the products recommended by the influencer, and the role of self-discrepancies and the intention to follow the influencer's recommendations in this relationship. Participants in the influencer condition are found to have greater virtual self-discrepancies, which in turn lead to a greater intention to follow the advice and recommendations of the influencer.

Notably, we observe that when individuals are exposed to the content shared by an influencer, their rating for their ideal social media profile is not significantly different from their rating for the influencer's profile. On the other hand, when participants are exposed to the same profile with the information that this is the profile of a regular social media user, the difference between the ratings given by the respondents to the individual are quite similar to the ratings they give to their actual self and significantly lower than the rating they give to their ideal self. This lends support to our proposition about why individuals end up experiencing greater discrepancies after exposure to influencers - influencers are viewed as social media standards, and exposure to their content can increase the salience of the attributes that make them admirable and appreciated by a large number of followers. As a result, individuals tend to align their expected ideal self with what appears to be appreciated in that given space, an inference they may draw from cues such as the number of likes or followers the influencer has and treat influencers as equivalents of one's ideal virtual self. This may or may not be the case with other social media users. At the same time, individuals also report greater intentions to follow the advice of the influencer and may do so by purchasing the products or brands recommended by the influencer. Further still, the higher virtual discrepancy arising from exposure to social media influencers leads to a greater intention to follow the advice given by the influencers for altering one's virtual and offline self-presentation, which in turn results in a higher intention to purchase the products suggested by the influencer. We thus find support that the tendency to engage in consumption behaviors to support that virtual and actual self-presentation in line with the recommendations of other social media users is higher when the comparison is made with influencers than regular social media users, and this is shaped by the high self-discrepancies arising out of exposure to social media influencers (versus regular users).

Interestingly, we find that there are significant differences between the intention to follow influencer advice and purchase intent for virtual and offline self-presentation. Both variables record higher values in the virtual condition than in the offline condition, and one such explanation may be associated with the actual or perceived differences between the two spaces in terms of socially acceptable or appropriate forms of consumption. For instance, we

find that while there are no significant differences between the purchase intent for the socially acceptable outfit for virtual or offline self-presentation, there is a very large and significant difference in the purchase intent for the less acceptable outfit between virtual and offline self-presentation. This suggests that while individuals may not intend to wear an outfit deemed inappropriate or unacceptable in the offline space, they do not exhibit the same reticence when it comes to wearing the outfit in the virtual space, thus highlighting the differences in how individuals may choose to construct a virtual self that may or may not be consistent with their offline self. Now, as Suh et al. (2013) argue, such constructions of a virtual self can be interpreted in one of two ways – they may enable an individual to experience liberation from a real-world actual self that they wish to change, but can only do so to an extent defined by corporal bodily conditions and feasibility restraints (Jackson and Luchner, 2018; Chae, 2018; Vendemia and DeAndrea, 2018). At the same time, in the process of internalizing standards established through influencer trends and viral content, an individual may go overboard in the construction of a virtual self that is so far removed from their actual self that it becomes a socio-psychological challenge. For example, Skogen et al. (2021) document how self-presentation on social media is associated with reduced quality of life and mental health challenges in teenagers. Similar findings are reported by Raggatt et al. (2018) in the case of adults, thereby making the online self an important construct deserving more attention in the literature on influencer marketing and its impact on consumers. As a result, the affordances for controlling, editing, and manipulating one's self-image can result in inauthentic self-presentations.

In addition, we also find that while the purchase intent drops significantly from high to low for the less acceptable outfit as we move from virtual to actual self-presentation, the drop is not as steep in the case of exposure to the SMU as it is for the SMI. This may be explained on the basis of inferred appropriateness or acceptability of consumption – if a regular person finds it comfortable to wear a particular outfit on social media, consumers may interpret it as a cue of social acceptance for an outfit they might otherwise consider inappropriate. However, this area of study deserves further examination, and future studies can compare the extent to which differences in the norms of a given social space may manifest in distinct behaviors.

Implications

Overall, we find that self-discrepancy increases upon exposure to social media influencers, as does the desire to learn more about and the intent to purchase the products or brands recommended by the influencer. The fact that such an effect prevails even when the consumer has no knowledge about the brand and its products or the influencer herself, and the product belongs to a very high involvement category is compelling evidence for the effectiveness and value of influencer marketing. This is especially relevant because most studies treat self-discrepancy as a variable that interacts with exposure to influencer marketing and its impact on consumer behavior as a moderating force, whereas the fact that such exposure itself can lead to self-discrepancies highlights that not only does exposure affect the individual's behavior, it affects the individual himself/herself. In addition, given that increasingly many, if not all social interactions transpire over social media platforms, we contribute to theory and practice by examining the impact of exposure to influencer content on an individual's virtual self-discrepancy, and their behaviors and intentions for offline and virtual self-presentation. Notably, we find that the tendency to engage in consumption behaviors to support that virtual and actual self-presentation in line with the

recommendations of other social media users is higher when the comparison is made with influencers than regular social media users, and this is shaped by the high self-discrepancies arising out of exposure to social media influencers (versus regular users). We also find that while there are no significant differences between the purchase intent for the socially acceptable outfit for virtual or offline self-presentation, there is a very large and significant difference for the purchase intent for the less acceptable outfit between virtual and offline self-presentation and identify boundary conditions for the effectiveness and influence of social media influencers.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Our study can serve as a starting point for several examinations – it provides initial evidence that there may be differences in what is considered by individuals as suitable for virtual versus real-world self-presentation, and there may be differences between virtual and real-world consumption arising out of exposure to different users. This may also serve as preliminary evidence and starting point for research that examines the extent to which influencers can impact consumer behaviors and intentions across virtual and offline spaces of self-expression and presentation.

While our study touches upon several new and intriguing directions of inquiry, future research can improve upon our contributions in one of several ways. While we use a lab experiment design to control for confounds, there may be other variables that impact consumer behavior in the real world, such as duration of exposure and experience with the influencer's content over time, which can be accommodated in a longitudinal study or a field experiment conducted over a longer duration. Second, we focus on high-involvement product categories related to one's appearance. Future studies can extend our understanding and applicability or inapplicability across a range of categories in which influencers create content – which may be higher or lower on social media visibility and individual involvement. We also operationalize comparisons in a manner that we focus on the commercial aspect of content – in the first study, we compare influencer versus brand endorsement; in the second, we compare influencer and non-influencer exposure on purchase intent and desire to imitate the influencer through consumption. The intention to follow advice or desire to learn more may not only be limited to the consumption behavior of tangible commodities, but it may also relate to the usage of affordances that allow individuals to indicate compliance with social media standards, in several cases, without actually even consuming the products required to do so. For instance, several software allow individuals to superimpose clothing of choice or travel locations as backgrounds that can allow an individual to present an ideal virtual self without actually even wearing the outfit or travelling to the desired destination. In addition, the implication of these behaviors related to selective or altered self-presentation on consumer well-being is an area that can be examined in future research. In addition, we focus on a sample for whom Instagram and social self-presentation are highly relevant. Future studies can also examine samples that differ in the relevance they ascribe to social media platforms, and the differences or similarities exhibited by individuals across genders, age, and financial capacity.

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