**Social Media “Stars” Vs “The Ordinary” Me:**

*Influencer marketing and the role of self-discrepancies, perceived homophily, authenticity, self-acceptance, and mindfulness*

**Abstract**

*Purpose*

Social media influencers have become constant companions of a large audience of young consumers, but a crucial yet underexplored area of examination relates to the implications of exposure to influencers for an individual’s self-concept. We examine if and how individuals experience self-discrepancies when exposed to influencers, and the impact of such discrepancies on their affect, cognition, and behaviors towards the influencers and the brands they endorse.

*Method*

We thematically analyze seventeen semi-structured interviews, develop a conceptual model, and present a set of hypotheses. The hypotheses are tested by analyzing survey data from 503 respondents, using structural equation modeling.

*Findings*

Individuals actively engage in comparisons with influencers’ virtual self-presentation and treat them as emblematic of an ideal self. The associated self-discrepancy can lead to both negative and positive affect, but while the latter has a positive impact on e-WOM and Purchase intent, the former has a negative impact. Perceived homophily dampens the impact of exposure to influencer content on discrepancy and strengthens the link between discrepancy and positive affect. Self-acceptance and mindfulness positively moderate the impact of discrepancy on positive affect, and negatively for negative affect. Perceived authenticity strengthens the impact of positive affect on e-WOM and dampens the impact of negative affect on purchase intention.

*Originality*

We identify the influencer-follower relationship as a unique social exchange where the source of self-discrepancy is also a homophilic solution provider for achieving one’s ideal self, and report both positive and negative affect as outcomes of experiencing a self-discrepancy induced by a target perceived as more attainable. We situate understandings of perceived homophily and authenticity along these relationships and identify self-acceptance and mindfulness as mechanisms used by individuals to deal with discrepancies.

*Research limitations/implications*

We contribute to the literature on self-discrepancies by identifying a consumer context where in addition to the theoretically predicted negative affect, an individual may experience more positive emotions like feeling motivated or inspired because of the perceived attainability of an influencer as an ideal self. We contribute to the influencer marketing literature by examining the influencer-follower relationship and its implications for an individual's self-concept, including the role played by perceived homophily and authenticity. We also contribute to the literature on consumer well-being and identify the role of self-acceptance and mindfulness in shaping consumer experiences.

*Practical Implications*

We provide a nuanced analysis of the impact of influencer marketing on consumer behavior with a focus on its impact on an individual’s self-concept. We argue for the role of perceived homophily and authenticity in shaping favorable consumer behavior outcomes and offer evidence for more inclusive approaches to marketing.

***Keywords: Influencer marketing, social media, self-discrepancies, perceived homophily, perceived authenticity***

**Introduction**

According to the 2023 Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report, the global market size of influencer marketing has catapulted from USD 1.7 billion in 2016 to nearly USD 21.1 billion in 2023 (Geyser, 2023). More than 67% of CMOs have allocated separate budgets in their annual marketing plans for influencer marketing, and this increase in spending and managerial focus on influencer marketing corresponds to the role played by influencers in promoting products and services (Lim et al., 2017). Considered “trusted tastemakers” or opinion leaders, influencers can enable brands to increase their exposure, generate new leads, and engage with a loyal community of followers (De Veirman et al., 2017). In addition, influencers can serve as an alternate pathway for brands to reach out to their consumers and bypass the resistance to traditional forms of advertising, such as high rates of ad-blocking (according to the Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report (2022), the global average rate of desktop ad-blocking is above 43%; Levin, 2020).

However, while the value of influencer marketing as a promotional channel continues to be acknowledged across practice and an emerging body of literature, most influencer marketing campaigns continue to be implemented on a “trial and error” approach, with little convergence on the parameters for strategizing or evaluating their success (Ye et al., 2021). Research is wanting in terms of a thorough examination of the factors that shape the influencer-follower relationship and the implications of such relationships for the consumer, the influencer, and the brand (Gräve, 2019). There is a need for 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 (Javornik et al, 2022; Lee et al., 2021; Hudders et al., 2022).

Notably, how individuals think about and reveal themselves has significantly changed with the onset and penetration of social media (Wesseldyk, 2017). What is considered desirable on social media may, in turn, be defined in relation to popular individuals in that space, and exposure to content or content creators who are admired or followed by a large number of people can result in an internalization of their behaviors and attributes as one’s ideal self (Bessenoff, 2006). A comparison between this ideal self and one’s actual self can result in experiencing a self-discrepancy, which, according to the self-discrepancy theory, can result in emotions like dejection and anxiety (Higgins, 1987). In turn, an individual may engage in behaviors directed at reducing the negative affect, and there is some evidence across the literature on discrepancies that argues how individuals employ consumption behaviors aimed at achieving one’s ideal self in doing so (Sharma and Alter, 2012; Hoegg et al., 2014). Given that social media platforms can serve as a space for identifying and making comparisons with referent others, a crucial direction of examination is: how can influencer marketing shape consumer behavior by inducing self-discrepancies?

Further, if an individual does experience a self-discrepancy upon exposure to influencers, the theoretical prediction that such an experience will result in a negative emotional experience presents the need to examine the implications of such exposure for an individual’s well-being (O’reilly et al., 2018). For instance, serious concerns have been raised regarding the impact of exposure to social media content on consumers’ well-being, such as exerting more pressure on young adults to conform to “trends” or body image and appearance ideals or resulting in them engaging in constant comparisons with the picture-perfect lives of others (Fardouly and Rapee, 2019). In the specific context of influencer marketing, however, there is limited research that examines the implications of self-discrepancies induced by exposure to the ‘ideal’ lives of influencers, and we attempt to fill this gap by studying how individuals respond to exposure to influencer content, especially when it is treated as a virtual ideal.

At the same time, what makes the influencer context atypical as compared to other social media users is that influencers are followed, in the first place, because of their ability to offer genuine and credible advice for attaining that ideal self. In addition, unlike traditional celebrities, influencers are regular people from similar socio-economic backgrounds as oneself. As a result, an ideal self as typified by influencers can be perceived as more achievable or attainable (Shen and Sengupta, 2018; Valkenburg and Piotrowski, 2017). Thus, there may be differences in an individual’s perceptions of “closeness” or homophily with influencers vis a vis other content creators, but there is a need for studies to examine the impact of such differences on individual tendencies to perceive others as relevant ideals, engage in comparisons and experience self-discrepancies, the potency with which they experience the resulting affect, and their tendency to engage in behaviors aimed at reducing such discrepancies (Schouten et al., 2020).

In addition, there is limited research that examines if and how consumers discern the differences between an influencer’s self-presentation on social media platforms and how he/she might be in their actual lives, the impact of such perceptions on their interpretation of the influencer as an ideal worthy of imitation, and in turn, their response to influencer content (Lee et al., 2021). As Boerman and Muller (2022) argue, perceptions of an influencer’s authenticity can play an important role in shaping consumer behavior, but there is a need for a more nuanced understanding of how individuals utilize such perceptions in responding to self-discrepancies and the resulting affect. 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 lacking (Lou and Kim, 2019).

The present study seeks to fill these gaps by employing a mixed-methods design comprising a qualitative study (thematic analysis of 17 semi-structured interviews) and a quantitative study (503 responses to a survey, analyzed using structural equation modelling). We examine how influencers serve as identity exemplars or ideals and the role of self-discrepancies in shaping consumer behavior in response to influencer marketing. We report the presence of a highly engaged influencer-follower relationship based on perceptions of homophily and authenticity. In influencer marketing, we also identify a consumer context where self-discrepancies may not necessarily lead to negative outcomes alone, but both positive and negative affect may arise from self-discrepancies. We study the relationship between this affect and consumer behavior outcomes like e-WOM and purchase intent and contribute to theoretical and practical understandings of self-discrepancy and influencer marketing. We also identify the role played by mindfulness and self-acceptance in determining an individual’s emotional experiences and well-being and provide empirical support for inclusive approaches to marketing that enable consumer decision-making through positive experiences instead of feelings of distress or vulnerability.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. We begin with a review of the literature, followed by a discussion of the two studies. In the subsequent sections, we share our findings and their implications and conclude with the directions for future research and the paper’s limitations.

**Review of the Literature**

*Social media influencers, self-discrepancies, affect, and behavior*

The rapid penetration of social media platforms has significantly changed how individuals think about and reveal themselves (Wesseldyk, 2017). 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 (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Fudurić, 2021). In addition, 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 the social standards of the online space (Van der Schyff et al., 2022; Kedzior et al., 2016).

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 (Li and Peng, 2021). We argue that exposure to the content shared by influencers may result in individuals accessing and internalizing the attributes of influencers as their ideal self and comparing their self-concept with the influencer’s self-presentation. Such comparisons can result in experiencing gaps between one’s actual and ideal self, or a self-discrepancy, which may, in turn, shape the individual’s behaviors aimed at reducing the discrepancy and the accompanying emotional experience (Higgins, 1987).

Across the emerging body of literature on social media influencers, there is some preliminary evidence of social comparisons and experiences of self-discrepancies. For instance, Chae (2018) observes that exposure to influencers results in the individual comparing their life with the influencer. Malär et al. (2018) contend that individuals engage in automatic self-appraisals in the process of appropriating meaning from influencer content. Jin et al. (2019) and Aw and Chuah (2021) discuss how social comparisons and self-discrepancies between one’s actual and ideal self can impact consumer behavior in response to exposure to influencer marketing. Notably, however, the aforementioned studies often treat self-discrepancy as a moderator, and do not account for the possibility of self-discrepancy being an outcome of exposure to influencers itself.

Further, and 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). Parallelly, Dwivedi et al., (2021) report the presence of negative affect associated with exposure to influencers, manifested in expressions such as “others have a better life than me.” There is thus a need to examine if self-discrepancy can be a potential explanation for such an experience, and a systematic examination of how negative affect may be an outcome of exposure to influencer content is currently missing in the 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 in the self-discrepancy literature 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). It is important to note here 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 in a state of high energy, full concentration, and pleasurable engagement. In contrast, low positive affect is characterized by sadness and lethargy. 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 (Verhagen et al., 2013).

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 an ideal-self or 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 positive or negative affect. Such an examination in the specific context of exposure to influencer content is not only lacking but significantly warranted, as it may offer implications for improving both our understanding of the consumer experience of engaging with influencers and influencer marketing effectiveness.

*Self-discrepancies, affect, and individual differences in psychological well-being*

The likelihood of an individual experiencing a self-discrepancy upon exposure to influencers’ content, 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 well-being. At the same time, and as Vrontis et al. (2021) argue, studies examining the impact of exposure to influencers’ content on an individual’s well-being 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 to make 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 (Taylor, 2020; Fowler and Thomas, 2023) there is a need to examine the implications it can have from a consumer well-being 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.

Closely associated with an individual’s psychological well-being, and as identified in our qualitative work (discussed in a subsequent section), self-acceptance can potentially play a key role in determining the nature of affect experienced by an individual upon realizing a self-discrepancy. According to the works of Ellis (1977, p.101), self-acceptance can be defined as when “the individual fully accepts himself whether or not he behaves intelligently, correctly, or competently and whether or not other people approve, respect, or love him.” Chamberlain and Haaga (2001a) argue how low levels of self-acceptance can result in experiencing negative affect like depression and anxiety, and can lower the levels of positive affect, such as happiness and life satisfaction. The importance of self-acceptance for an individual’s well-being notwithstanding, very few studies examine the impact of self-acceptance on behavior and affect (Flett et al., 2003). In particular, there are no studies that examine the role played by self-acceptance in the influencer-follower relationship, the impact of exposure to influencer marketing on an individual’s perceptions of himself/herself, and the resulting affect and consumer response to influencer marketing.

Another variable that is closely associated with an individual’s psychological well-being (as we observe in our qualitative study discussed in a subsequent section) and that can potentially impact the nature of the affect arising out of self-discrepancy is mindfulness. According to Brown and Ryan (2003, p.822), mindfulness can be understood as “the state of being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present” and has been argued to play an important role in generating well-being outcomes. It is important to note that there are differences between mindfulness and constructs like self-acceptance. Mindfulness, as argued by Shear and Jevning (1999, p.204), simply offers a “bare display of what is taking place.” It does not generate a mental account of the self, as is the case in notions of self-acceptance (Brown and Ryan, 2003). The importance of mindfulness can be further understood by discussing how it impacts an individual’s well-being – as Ryan and Deci (2000) contend, mindfulness can disengage an individual from automatic habits, thoughts, and behavioral patterns that may be unhealthy. By fostering more informed and self-regulated thoughts, responses, and behavior, it can thus result in happiness and well-being, and is found to enhance positive affect and reduce negative affect (Brown and Ryan, 2003). Despite such hypothesized and significant implications of mindfulness for consumer well-being, there is very limited research that examines the role of mindfulness in consumer contexts. In particular, there are no studies in extant literature that examine the role of mindfulness in the context of the influencer-follower relationship, or the impact of influencer marketing on consumer well-being. This is an important gap in the literature that the present study seeks to examine.

*Perceptions of homophily*

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. Homophily can be understood as the extent to which individuals in an interaction share similarities in their values, backgrounds, and attitudes (Eyal and Rubin, 2003; De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008; McPherson et al., 2001). Perceptions of homophily can play an important role in communication encounters, as they can cause individuals to develop an understanding or strong feelings of connectedness with the other and can compensate for the ambiguity inherent in virtual interactions, thus increasing communication effectiveness in general (McCroskey et al., 1975), and in the context of online interactions in particular (Zhang et al., 2018).

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 “like 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, 2022). In turn, perceptions of homophily can result in the development of strong feelings of understanding, trust, and connection between the individual and the influencer (Ruef et al., 2003; Bu et al., 2022). Such an experience, as Miceli and Castelfranchi (2007) argue, will be driven by a motivation to possess equivalent achievements, 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 influencer content, at the same time, given that the influencer is perceived as homophilic 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 how an individual is likely to be affected by influencer content, and the impact of perceptions of homophily on such experiences.

*Perceived authenticity*

In addition to perceptions of homophily, the perceptions of authenticity associated with an influencer have been found to play a role in shaping the nature of an individual’s relationship with an influencer and her/his behaviors, such as willingness to follow the influencer’s suggestions (Schouten et al., 2020). Authenticity can be understood as being true to oneself, or portraying unpolished behaviors, personalities, or beliefs, which are consistent with how the individual is with his or her trusted social group (Morhart et al., 2015; Goffman, 1959). In the specific context of influencer marketing, it is operationalized as comprising aspects of realness, trustworthiness, and the affective and relational components associated with the exchanges between the influencer and her/his followers (Lee and Eastin, 2020, p. 825; Lee, 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., 2022; Shoenberger and Kim, 2022), but these studies do not examine such 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 and Kim, 2019). While it has been acknowledged to play a key role in determining how consumers interpret posts shared or promoted by different types of sources (Suciu, 2020; Lee et al., 2021), it remains to be ascertained how individuals perceive authenticity from influencers’ virtual self-presentation, the process underlying the development and maintenance of such perceptions, and the impact of such perceptions on the individual’s behavior and feelings towards oneself, as well as towards the influencer and their recommendations.

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. In particular, we focus on an examination of the following key questions:

*RQ1: Can exposure to the content shared by influencers influence an individual’s ideal self and result in him/her experiencing a self-discrepancy or a gap between his/her actual self and this ideal self?*

*RQ 2: What could be the impact of such an experience on an individual’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors? Do individuals always experience negative affect in relation to a self-discrepancy associated with exposure to influencer content?*

*RQ3: Can there be any influencer specific variables that shape an individual’s experience of self-discrepancies and the associated emotions and behaviors? How do perceived homophily and authenticity of the influencer affect individual experiences and responses to self-discrepancy?*

*RQ4: Can there be any individual specific variables that shape an individual’s experience of self-discrepancies and the associated emotions and behaviors? How can psychological differences between individuals impact how they handle and respond to self-discrepancies and the associated emotional experience?*

We discuss the methodology employed for our exploratory qualitative study and our findings in the next section.

**Study 1**

***Sample and methodology***

As Steckler argues (in Tolley et al., 2016), qualitative research methods are suitable for questions of a ‘how’ or ‘why’ nature, can allow the researcher to consider the ‘reality’ or the meaning of participants’ experiences, and explore how these experiences and meanings might be informed by discourses, assumptions, or ideas in wider society (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Given the limited literature available on our direction of inquiry, we employed this approach to explore experiences, variables, and relationships without imposing any limitations on the way individuals experienced these phenomena. We conducted 17 semi-structured interviews with individuals aged 18-35, the largest and most active demographic consuming influencer marketing content (Influencer Marketing Report, 2022). 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 most appropriate (Carson et al*.,* 2001; Truong et al., 2010). To ensure the inclusion of knowledgeable participants, we used the iterative purposive 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 a convergence of views. The interviews were conducted by the first author, who shared demographic similarities with the participants, enhancing the discussions’ quality and openness (Luker, 2008; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Jacobson and Harrison, 2022). The semi-structured interviews were performed between February to March 2022, and were transcribed and analyzed thereafter on Atlas.ti, using the thematic analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The interviews were conducted and recorded on Zoom and lasted from about 45 minutes to an hour. Table I describes the participants interviewed.

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***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 and their content. These themes are discussed next.

*Exposure to influencer content, comparisons, and self-discrepancy*

Our first research question was to examine if exposure to influencer content affected an individual’s ideal self and/or resulted in them experiencing a self-discrepancy or a gap between this ideal self and their actual self. We found evidence for such an experience–- across our data items, respondents shared how they often compared themselves with influencers. These comparisons could be automatic or purposeful and were related to specific dimensions of the individual’s life, like body image or lifestyle (especially material life). Several participants reported consciously defining their ideal or desired self based on such exposure and comparisons with influencers, often describing them as online social standards and aspirational ideals. For instance, a female respondent (aged 23) specifically associated exposure to influencer content with comparing herself with the influencer, and experienced a tendency to idealize or aspire for a similar lifestyle:

*But if you are following influencers, regularly seeing what clothes they wear or how they portray themselves on social media, it also starts affecting you. You feel that even you should take some lessons from them, be more like them.*

Notably, such experiences were often associated with an individual’s self-presentation efforts on social media. Participants reported how they constructed an online or virtual self as akin to their ideal self - as jovial, happy, successful, and beautiful. Such behaviors were often driven by the need for social desirability or acceptance and were often associated with seeking the approval of others in one’s network. Since influencers enjoyed a high degree of social acceptance and desirability, they were that much more impactful in shaping an individual’s ideal self. At the same time, social media affordances, like filters, coupled with a careful selection of posts allowed the respondent to create a virtual self that was more similar to the influencer, especially when such a task was not achievable offline.

Thus, we found that exposure to the content shared by influencers could influence an individual’s ideal self and resulted in them experiencing a gap or a self-discrepancy between their actual self and the ideal self influenced by exposure to influencer content.

*Discrepancies, affect, and behavior*

Our second research question was to examine the potential impact of experiencing a self-discrepancy upon exposure to influencer content on an individual’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. We also wanted to examine if negative affect, and that alone, was the emotional experience associated with such a self-discrepancy. Across the interviews, several respondents reported how they often compared their actual selves with what they saw influencers doing, and upon realizing that a gap existed between their actual and ideal self, the ideal being defined with reference to the influencer, they felt demotivated, disappointed, frustrated, angry, and envious. “Feeling like you’re not good enough” and self-doubt were commonly observed in our data set. For instance, a female respondent (aged 18) 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 standard which was ideal in being “beautiful” or “desirable” and could result in making regular users insecure. Some outcomes of this affective experience included deleting one’s account, developing eating disorders, easily getting upset or agitated, and an overall sense of being tired of presenting a virtual self that was different from one’s actual self.

However, 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), we observed that in the case of exposure to influencers, not all participants experienced negative affect and thoughts. Some participants reported feeling motivated, inspired, and hopeful about achieving their ideal self after looking at an influencer who exemplified such an ideal self, without experiencing any negative affect per se. For example, a female respondent (aged 28) said that she often saw influencers who were living an ideal life, and that gave her hope and motivation that she could also achieve the same life because someone very similar to her had been able to do so. Individuals described how they saw such influencers as exemplars whose recommendations could help them achieve their ideal self, and as a result, engaged in following their advice and imitating their choices, albeit without feeling overwhelmed or dejected.

Overall, we observed that self-discrepancies and the related affective experience were often instrumental in shaping behaviors such as developing and maintaining engagement with the influencer and their content through messages, likes, and comments, or following their advice. Some participants reported consciously constructing their ideal self in line with an influencer’s profile and behaviors. Others described how they felt like they were a part of the influencer’s “fam” (family) or belonged to a community with a similar mindset, and often reached out to the influencer before making purchase decisions. We also observed how stronger affective experiences were associated with greater tendencies to seek out information or assistance from influencers, talk about their recommendations with others, and base their judgment on the influencer’s advice. Notably, most participants 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 decisions about achieving their ideal self. Thus, we found that self-discrepancy arising out of exposure to influencer content could result in both positive and negative affect, which, in turn, could impact individuals’ behaviors.

*Perceptions of homophily*

The next research question that we set out to examine was if there were some influencer-specific variables that shaped an individual’s experience of self-discrepancies and the resulting affect or behaviors. Notably, we wanted to study if perceptions of homophily and authenticity associated with the influencer could affect individual experiences of discrepancy and affect. We observed how a perception of the extent to which the influencer was “like them” was strongly associated with respondents’ tendency to compare and internalize the influencer as an ideal self. Participants shared that they compared themselves more with “people who are less distant from me than those who are more distant” in terms of a similarities in values, attitudes, backgrounds, or an overall perception of homophily with the point of comparison. Defining this perception in terms of a continuum between people they knew personally or who were similar in attitudes, values, or background (high homophily) and perceptually highly dissimilar individuals, like celebrities (low homophily), most respondents identified influencers as more homophilic to themselves than celebrities, referring to the former as “ordinary people like me.”

*Figure 1: Findings from Qualitative Study*



Further, while influencers were often treated as an ideal self across our discussions, participants also reported their perceptions of influencers as more attainable ideals, as compared to celebrities. They described how this impacted their experiences of self-discrepancy – while comparisons were more frequent with influencers, they were also perceived as more attainable standards than celebrities. As a result, the perceived gap between one’s actual and ideal self appeared much smaller in the case of exposure to influencers than to celebrities.

In addition, not only did individuals experience negative or positive affect 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 more similar or homophilic to themselves than those considered less homophilic. For instance, a female participant (student, aged 26) described how the potency of a negative affect was stronger in the case of people perceived to be more homophilic or closer to oneself than others:

*Oh, then the amount of negativity that I have increases 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 if I’m working hard, why are things not working for me?*

Another respondent (male, aged 27) described how coming across influencers who led similar lives or had the same background and values as him served as a stronger source of motivation and inspiration because “it kind of then juxtaposes what I was thinking with what is being shown (by the influencer).” 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!*

Thus, we found that influencers, in general, were perceived as more homophilic and closer to oneself, and as a result, self-discrepancies arising out of exposure to such influencers was found to be lower, given that the influencer appeared that much more achievable or attainable compared to a standard perceived as distant or heterophilic (like celebrities). Self-discrepancy arising out of exposure to influencer content was lower in the case of exposure to influencers perceived as more homophilic than less homophilic. Further, given the same degree of self-discrepancy arising out of exposure to a referent’s social media content, the potency of positive or negative affect was greater for discrepancy arising out of exposure to more homophilic influencers than less homophilic referents like celebrities.

*Perceptions of authenticity*

In addition, we examined if perceptions of authenticity that participants associated with the influencer impacted the link between exposure to influencer content and an individual's behavior. Most participants described authenticity in terms of a degree of "realness" that they associated with the influencer and her/his content, and carefully evaluated whether the influencer was being honest, sincere, and holistic in their content and reviews. Sharing information about one’s personal life with their followers, such as emotions and experiences, enabled the creation of close and intimate relationships and gave an impression of authenticity. Labels such as “real” or “authentic” were often used for influencers, and such perceptions were often in comparison with celebrities, whose social media content was considered staged, paid for, or handled by their public relations team. Others argued for a need for influencers to share the entirety of their experiences, not just the happy, glamourous, or successful sides, and focused on 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 influencer's journey created a strong connection with them, and led to a desire to grow with them in the process of defining and achieving an ideal self.

Respondents also described the process of actively evaluating whether the content shared was genuine and authentic, 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) shared:

*She (the influencer) used to talk about PCOS and weight gain issues, which I could relate to, so I started following her. Gradually I realized this woman was promoting a lot of products at the same time. She'd pick up any product from five different brands - like this is good, that is good. How do I distinguish? Correct? So I have these trust issues, like if you like Charlotte Tilbury (luxury brand) and Plum (drug-store brand), you like everything, right? So again, how do I know what is right, and do I follow your advice? Maybe not.*

We observed how participants rewarded wholesome, unfiltered content and honesty in an influencer’s self-presentation, and how authentic experiences, when shared with followers, led to greater engagement and stronger relationships with the influencer. On the other hand, participants shared that when they came across content that was visibly inauthentic – where the influencer’s self-presentation seemed staged or impossible to achieve, or when they presented one-sided or excessively favorable reviews of endorsed brands, they responded by unfollowing the influencer, or disengaging with their content, and most importantly, not considering them as sources of information that could be used as a basis for decision making. Thus, we found how perceived authenticity of influencers was likely to impact consumer response arising out of self-discrepancy and the resulting affect towards the influencer and the products/brands used, recommended, or promoted by them.

*Self-acceptance*

Our final research question was to examine if there were any individual specific variables that shaped an individual’s experience of self-discrepancies and the associated emotions and behaviors. Notably, the observation that some individuals experienced positive affect while others experienced the theoretically predicted negative affect in relation to self-discrepancies warranted an examination of the question that could psychological differences between individuals impact how they handled and responded to self-discrepancies and the associated emotional experience?

To answer this question, we examined the conditions under which an individual was likely to experience negative or positive affect and found that more self-accepting individuals were less likely to experience negative emotions and engaged in more constructive rather than destructive thoughts and actions. While several participants 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 male respondent (aged 27) described how he was comfortable with most aspects of his life and did not see merit in comparing 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 inspired him to emulate those aspects that were feasible for him and ignore the rest, resulting in an overall positive experience. Similarly, a female respondent (aged 29) described how she gradually developed a sense of control over her content consumption and subsequent emotional responses, and the importance of self-acceptance in doing so. She shared:

 *Some of us are in the 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, and I don’t need to chase these standards.*

We found that participants who acknowledged how they were different from influencers and displayed a general acceptance of conditions and limitations associated self-discrepancies with more positive experiences, such as feeling inspired or motivated to achieve elements of their ideal self as exemplified by the influencer. On the other hand, participants who exhibited a lack of self-acceptance displayed a fear of judgment, felt easily threatened, found it difficult to be themselves, and experienced greater dejection and anxiety.

*Discerning the virtual from the real – the role of mindfulness*

Another individual-specific variable that we observed as playing a role in enhancing or dampening the impact of self-discrepancies on affect was mindfulness. Mindfulness 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. Some described how being more mindful or conscious of what content one was consuming and the intent behind that content allowed them to differentiate useful and realistic content from inauthentic or unattainable references. For example, a male respondent (aged 25) shared his experience of creating content as an influencer:

*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 so easy, they are having so much fun. And that makes it hard … that comparison is… sometimes it is very bad.*

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, and utilized judgment in selectively responding to content with the motive of self-development and not from a position of self-doubt. Describing how mindless consumption of influencer content could have a negative effect on a user, a female respondent (aged 29) shared:

*People can get sucked into this whole virtual world and see other people's lives in an almost constructed way. We only see a part of the influencer's life; without seeing the whole thing, they will take it to be real and apply it to themselves, which can be harmful.*

Thus, we observed how difference between individuals in terms of their degree of self-acceptance and mindfulness impacted the nature and degree of affective experiences, such that individuals with higher levels of self-acceptance and mindfulness were likely to perceive self-discrepancies and comparisons as sources of motivation and growth, or experience more positive affect, as compared to those with lower levels of self-acceptance and mindfulness. The lower the degree of self-acceptance and mindfulness, the more likely was the individual to experience negative affect in relation to self-discrepancies and comparisons, such as feeling demotivated or dejected.

**Discussion and Hypotheses Development for Study 2**

Figure 1 summarizes our observations. Across an emerging body of literature, the question of how exposure to influencer marketing drives consumer behavior by influencing an individual’s self-concept remains unexamined, and the interviews conducted allowed us to explore the implications of such exposure for one’s actual and ideal self, a comparison between the two, and the resulting self-discrepancy.

The internalization of another individual’s behaviors or attributes as one’s ideal self can happen when the other person’s lifestyle is made salient or perceived as a standard by a large number of individuals (Bessenoff, 2006). This is an important dimension that sets influencers apart from other users of social media. Social media influencers are followed by a large audience, and as such, tend to be perceived as tastemakers or opinion leaders (De Veirman et al., 2017). Our observations from the qualitative interview add value to these arguments - we note that participants repeatedly identified influencers as social media standards and internalized the attributes and behaviors of the influencer as important elements of their ideal self. Importantly, and in a departure from extant applications of self-discrepancy as a trait variable in studies on influencer marketing (e.g., Jin et al., 2019; Aw and Chuah, 2021), we observed that individuals experienced self-discrepancies due to exposure to influencer content as a state variable, or as something that was induced because of exposure to influencer content. Based on these observations, we present the following hypothesis:

*H1: Exposure to influencer content can induce a gap between one’s ideal and actual self, or a self-discrepancy.*

Further, we report the presence of the theoretically predicted and commonly documented negative affect as an outcome of experiencing a self-discrepancy. The self-discrepancy theory contends that recognizing a gap between one’s actual and ideal self can lead to negative affect such as dejection and anxiety, and an individual will engage in behaviors directed at reducing this affect (e.g., Higgins, 1987; Tangney, 1999; Sobol and Darke, 2014). For example, in the specific context of influencer marketing, Jin et al. (2019) examine the role of self-discrepancy in shaping consumer behavior (see also Dwivedi et al., 2021). However, it is important to note that the self-discrepancy associated with influencers may not always lead to negative affect and that alone, but 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, in our interviews, several participants reported experiencing positive emotions upon experiencing a gap between one’s actual self and an ideal self as typified by the influencer, such as feeling encouraged, inspired, motivated, and driven to achieve their ideal self.

A potential explanation for these observations, we note, lies in the uniqueness of the influencer-follower relationship – an influencer could induce self-discrepancy and, at the same time, offered suggestions on how one could achieve that ideal self and reduce the self-discrepancy. Further, by virtue of being perceived as someone similar to oneself, the influencer rendered that ideal self that much more attainable as a target, and as a result, an individual experienced positive affect. This is similar to theoretical explanations offered by scholars in the psychology literature: for instance, according to the social defaults theory, exposure to another individual’s lifestyle, recommendations, or choices can result in an inspiration to adopt the exemplar (Huh et al., 2014, cf., Ki et al., 2022). When individuals experience a strong emotional bond or an empathetic understanding with others, it may result in identification with and feelings of inspiration arising out of emotional affiliation to the other (Chartrand and Bargh, 1999; Ki et al., 2020). Such an emotional response can, in turn, result in pro-social behaviors such as sharing knowledge or adoption of influencers' behaviors (such as fitness routines) (Landis et al., 2009; Ki et al., 2020, 2022). Therefore, we hypothesize:

*H2(a): Self-discrepancies arising from exposure to influencer content can result in positive affect.*

*H2(b): Self-discrepancies arising from exposure to influencer content can result in negative affect.*

Now it is possible for individuals to perceive others as similar to oneself, and simultaneously view the referent as better or worse than them. Comparisons can be made with both similar and dissimilar others, and Wesseldyk (2017) contends, while individuals can experience a discrepancy with both similar and dissimilar others, including influencers and celebrities, there may be differences in the intensity and the degree to which they experience such a discrepancy and the resulting affect, depending upon the referent. For instance, Piehler et al. (2022) argue that identification with an influencer based on perceived homophily can make the influencer appear more achievable or plausible as an ideal. In that sense, and as Almeida (2019) argues, comparing oneself to someone who typifies one’s ideal self, and at the same time is similar in background, values, or attitudes can reduce the self-discrepancy arising out of exposure to the content shared by such an individual. Extending this understanding to social media contexts, perceptions of influencers as more homophilic than others like traditional celebrities may reduce the discrepancy arising out of comparing oneself to the referent, because that ideal may appear that much more achievable or attainable. This is because except for identifying a gap between their actual and ideal self on a specific attribute or behavior, the referent is “just like me” or similar to oneself in other domains, and the gap highlights the plausibility of achieving that target or the failure to do so (Taillon et al., 2020; Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016; Korotina and Jargalsaikhan, 2016). Thus, we hypothesize that:

*H3: Perceived homophily moderates the link between exposure to influencer content and self-discrepancy.*

Further still, and as we note in our qualitative study that respondents described feeling more positive or more negative in the case of discrepancies associated with exposure to more homophilic referents. A potential explanation for such experiences may lie in the argument made by Miceli and Castelfranchi (2007). They contend that the importance placed by individuals on the outcomes of comparisons with influential others (including both negative and positive experiences) will be greater in the case of someone who is perceived as similar to oneself, driven by the perception of the attainability of those attributes. Such perceptions can render some content and individuals more salient than others and increase the relevance of and tendency to seek the opinions and experiences shared by them (Hanks et al., 2017; Ismagilova et al., 2020). For instance, negative experiences, such as envy, tend to be more strongly experienced with reference to those considered as similar to oneself (e.g., Arnocky et al., 2016, Miceli and Castelfranchi, 2007). At the same time, as the sense of perceived homophily or similarity increases, the motivation to have equivalent achievements as the source of discrepancy can increase, without any hostile emotions. This may instead be due to a sense of feasibility and attainability of the referent as a target and a motivation to be like the referent or have similar achievements (Parrott and Smith, 1993; Lange and Crusius, 2015; Lockwood and Kunda, 1997). In other words, when the achievements or lifestyles depicted by a referent become too unattainable or the referent was perceived as less homophilic, both the negative (e.g., envy) as well as positive (e.g., motivation) links become weaker. In contrast, when the referent is perceived as more homophilic, her/his achievements can enhance the negative or positive affect resulting from self-discrepancies (e.g., Jin et al., 2019, 2021; Lockwood and Kunda 1997). As compared to influencers, we find that participants perceived traditional celebrities as unattainable standards or as too distant from oneself, and as a result, experienced a lower desire to imitate them or their choices to reach an ideal self. Based on the preceding discussion, we hypothesize that:

*H4(a): Perceived homophily positively moderates the link between self-discrepancy and positive affect.*

*H4(b):Perceived homophily positively moderates the link between self-discrepancy and negative affect.*

The resulting affect, as we find in our qualitative study, can shape consumer perceptions, intent, and behaviors towards influencers and the brands they endorse. This is similar to arguments elsewhere in the literature, where scholars contend that consumer action can be a direct outcome of experienced affect. In the particular context of social media, studies report how affect such as shame, guilt, or irritability, as well as inspiration, joy, and curiosity arising out of comparing oneself to others on social media, can result in sharing knowledge or adoption of behaviors of others, including influencers (e.g., Landis et al., 2009; Ki et al., 2020, 2022).

Notably, on the basis of the theories of goal-directed action (Perugini and Bagozzi, 2001), appraisal (Lazarus, 1990), and emotion-action tendencies (Frijda, 2010), it can be argued that affect can result in consumer actions such as purchase intention or e-WOM. According to the theory of social sharing (Rime et al., 1992), individuals may experience a need to express their emotions for multiple reasons, including seeking attention or strengthening social ties. As a result, the experienced affect, either positive or negative, can result in e-WOM (Derbaix and Vanhamme, 2003). Similarly, Verhagen et al. (2013) report how affect arising during the consumption experience can have a direct effect on online WOM. Nyer (1997) argues in the context of consumption resulting from experienced affect that negative affect, such as sadness or anger, can result in negative word of mouth whereas positive affect can reduce the probability of negative word of mouth. Similarly, Chu et al. (2019) argue how experiencing positive affect, such as feelings of belongingness, after being exposed to an influencer perceived as homophilic to oneself can lead to positive e-Word of Mouth for the brands endorsed by the influencer.

Similarly, the experienced affect can lead to a greater purchase intention for products endorsed by influencers. For instance, Xiao et al. (2018) document how consumers engage in symbolic consumption to signal an ideal self that is in greater alignment with influencers’ virtual self-presentation, offering consumption as a pathway to address the discomfort and negative affect arising out of experiencing the self-discrepancy. On the other hand, Ki and Kim (2019) report how emotions such as feeling motivated or inspired can increase purchase intent in an attempt to imitate the behaviors and attitudes displayed by the influencer and perceived by an individual as relevant to her/his ideal self. Thus, we hypothesize that:

*H5: Positive and negative affect arising from self-discrepancy result in greater e-WOM.*

*H6: Positive and negative affect arising from self-discrepancy result in greater purchase intent.*

Closely associated with an individual’s psychological well-being, and as identified in our qualitative work, self-acceptance can play a key role in determining the nature of affect experienced by an individual upon realizing a self-discrepancy. Ellis and Dryden (1997) argue that individuals with lower levels of self-acceptance are likely to feel more threatened by criticism and comparison, and have a greater chance of feeling worthless, especially when the salience of the critic or source of comparison is high. At the same time, individuals with higher degrees of self-acceptance are likely to be more objective in interpreting their evaluations of the self, and should thus experience more positive affect (Erikson, 1973; James and Zarett, 2006). The present study seeks to examine such an effect, and based on the preceding discussion, we hypothesize:

*H7: Self-acceptance positively moderates the relationship between self-discrepancy and positive affect.*

*H8: Self-acceptance negatively moderates the relationship between self-discrepancy and negative affect.*

Similarly, we observe the role played by mindfulness in determining the nature and potency of the experienced affect. As we note in our qualitative study, social media platforms provide individuals with a plethora of content that can continue to play automatically, offering the viewer exposure to a multitude of posts, one after the other, automatically. Such consumption of social media content is often characterized as mindless and can have a bearing on the individual’s well-being (Kuss and Griffiths, 2017; Przybylski et al., 2013). In addition, given that there may be individual differences in one’s tendency to be more or less mindful in consuming such content, there may be differential outcomes of exposure to social media influencers, self-discrepancies, and the resulting affect. For instance, several respondents described how they exercised mindfulness in terms of checking for the automaticity of thoughts and emotions arising out of exposure to content or experiencing a self-discrepancy. We also noted individual differences in one’s tendency to be more mindful or less mindful in consuming such content. As a result, different individuals tend to experience different outcomes of exposure to social media influencers, self-discrepancies, and the associated affect. Thus, we hypothesize that:

*H9: Mindfulness positively moderates the link between self-discrepancy and positive affect.*

*H10: Mindfulness negatively moderates the link between self-discrepancy and negative affect.*

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 by an influencer was genuine and authentic, how this evaluation was used as a deciding factor in whether or not to treat the influencer as an ideal, and if they should engage with or continue following an influencer and their advice and suggestions. They described how influencers’ self-disclosure and objective evaluations (e.g., one sided messages are perceived as less authentic than holistic and well-rounded reviews (Winter and Krämer, 2012)) contributed to perceptions of an influencer’s authenticity, which eventually enhanced or weakened their intentions to follow the influencer’s recommendations. We noted that perceived authenticity could enhance the link between affect and behavior, whereas in the case of individuals perceived as less authentic, individuals expressed resistance to engaging in pro-consumption behaviors or intentions. 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, talking about the recommended brand and the influencer with their friends, and indicating a motivation to try out the products mentioned by an influencer. On the contrary, individuals discussed how they punished inauthentic influencers by distancing, disengaging, and at times, negatively describing such influencers and their recommended brands.

Our findings are consistent with observations elsewhere in the literature. Influencers typically share information about their personal lives with their followers, such as emotions and experiences, which can give an impression of authenticity (Malik et al., 2016; Chung and Cho, 2017). Further, influencers who are perceived as more authentic can positively shape the intent to develop and maintain a relationship, follow their advice, and make purchase decisions based on their recommendations (e.g., Shan et al., 2020; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Lou and Kim, 2019; Tran and Strutton, 2014). Similarly, and as we observe across our qualitative interviews, reviews or recommendations perceived as more even-handed result in individuals viewing the recommended product in a more favorable light, as compared to one-sided or biased endorsements which are considered less authentic and reduce the degree of how favorably participants perceived the recommended product (Erkan and Evans, 2016).

Such perceptions of authenticity can act as a key factor that enhances the outcomes of persuasion (Nah, 2022). Lee and Eastin (2021) and Poyry et al. (2022) contend how the extent to which an influencer is perceived as authentic can affect the persuasiveness of an influencer as an endorser of a brand. According to the social influence literature, such perceptions can affect message acceptance (e.g., Enli, 2017; Stiers et al., 2021). In that sense, an influencer’s message to his or her followers convincing them to purchase a particular product or disseminating favorable word of mouth about the product can be enhanced by perceptions of authenticity of the influencer, as the source and the message become that much more acceptable than someone perceived as less authentic. Based on the preceding observations across the literature as well as in our qualitative study, we hypothesize that:

*H11(a): Perceived authenticity moderates the link between positive affect and e-WOM.*

*H11(b): Perceived authenticity moderates the link between negative affect and e-WOM.*

*H12(a): Perceived authenticity moderates the link between positive affect and purchase intent.*

*H12(b): Perceived authenticity moderates the link between negative affect and purchase intent.*

Thus, we obtained preliminary evidence for the relationships between these variables in the form of an interrelated framework from our qualitative study, which we developed in conjunction with the preceding review of the literature for examination as a hypothesized model. Figure 2 shows a conceptual model that summarizes our hypotheses. In the next sections, we outline the methodology employed to test our hypotheses, followed by the results and a discussion of the findings.

*Figure 2: Hypothesized Model for Structural Equation Modelling*



**Study 2**

***Sample and methodology***

For this study, we employed the self-administered cross-sectional survey methodology. Given that one of the largest segments of influencer marketing pertains to appearance (including beauty, fashion, body image, and fitness; Influencer Marketing Hub, 2022; Kim and Kim, 2021), participants were asked to confirm if they were familiar with any influencer who posted appearance-related content. Those who selected ‘no’ for this screening question were excluded from the study, and those who selected ‘yes’ were asked to mention the name of one such influencer. In the subsequent sections, participants completed a set of questions with respect to their identified influencer.

We used the three-item, five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) used by Pan et al. (2022) to measure exposure to influencer content. We operationalized appearance-related self-discrepancy in a manner similar to Jin and Muqaddam (2021). Participants were asked to rate their identified influencer, their ideal self, and their actual self on five dimensions on a semantic differential scale (Ohanian, 1990; for instance, 1 = unattractive to 5 = attractive). We conducted paired sample t-tests to compare the ratings for the influencer and an individual’s ideal, the ideal and the actual, and the influencer and the actual. We found that the ratings for the influencer (*M = 4.476 SD = 0.461)* were statistically higher than the ratings for the actual self (*M = 3.622, SD = 0.580, t (502) = 27.18, p = 0.000*), and the ratings for the ideal self (*M = 4.467, SD = 0.531)* were statistically higher than the actual self (*t (502) = 25.59, p = 0.000*). Another paired samples t-test indicated that there were no significant differences between the ratings for the influencer and the ideal self (*t (502) = 1.335, p > 0.10*). To measure Self-Discrepancy, we used the difference between the ratings for the ideal self and the actual self.

Positive and Negative affect were measured using the PANAS scale developed by Watson et al. (1988). Perceived homophily was measured using an eight-item, five-point Likert scale as used by Bu et al. (2022; originally by Ladhari et al. (2020)). For measuring e-WOM, participants were asked to rate three items on a five-point scale, adapted from Su et al. (2016). Purchase intent was measured using a five-point semantic differential scale (e.g., 1 = unlikely to 5 = likely) by Bearden et al. (1984). We measured self-acceptance on a three-item, five-point Likert scale, as used in Jung et al. (2017), and mindfulness on a five-item, five-point Likert scale for state mindfulness, as used by Brown and Ryan (2003). Perceived authenticity was measured using a ten-item, five-point Likert scale developed by Lee and Eastin (2021). We employed random parceling outlined by Williams et al. (2009) between the positive and negative affect subgroups to include five items each, two items from four dimensions of the perceived homophily scale, and two elements each from the five dimensions of the perceived authenticity scale. The measures used in the study are shown in Table II.

----- Insert Table II here -----

*Sample*

We collected data from Indian adults in the age group 18-35 who were familiar with or followed an influencer in the appearance-related content category. The survey was randomly distributed to a total of 580 participants, out of which 527 completed and returned the survey. The sample comprised students enrolled in undergraduate (n = 164) and graduate (n = 216) programs across two universities. We also collected data from a random sample of working professionals employed in a corporate park in Gurgaon (n =147) (with offices of business organizations in Tech, FMCG, Retail, Banking, and Consulting). We dropped 20 cases where respondents answered “No” to the screening question. Of the remaining 507 cases, we dropped two due to missing data over 20 percent and two cases due to disengagement (they answered somewhat agree to every Likert scale item), giving us N = 503 usable responses. A summary of the sample characteristics across gender, age, profession/education, and income is provided in Table III.

----- Insert Table III here -----

***Findings and Results***

*Measurement model*

We tested our measurement model using SPSS and AMOS 26.0 software. We assessed the reliability of each construct in an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using the values of Cronbach Alpha. Cronbach Alpha values greater than 0.7 indicate acceptable levels of reliability (Nunnally, 1978), and they ranged between 0.809 to 0.946 for our constructs. All measurements were thus evaluated as being acceptable (Table II).

This was followed by a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using maximum likelihood estimation (Table II). Based on an examination of factor loadings, frequency of large modification indices and item error variances, we dropped one item of mindfulness, two items of perceived homophily, and three items of perceived authenticity from the measurement model (Hair, 2009; Bagozzi et al., 1998). The fit indices for our measurement model were indicative of an acceptable fit with the data (*χ*2 = 2532.053, *df* = 896, p < .000; *χ2/df* = 2.826, CFI = 0.913, TLI = 0.904, IFI = 0.913, RMSEA = 0.060, SRMR = 0.049) (Hair, 2009; Hu and Bentler, 1999). Convergent validity was verified by examining the composite reliability, which was found to be above the prescribed level of 0.7 for each construct, and the average variance extracted, which exceeded the recommended level of 0.5 for each construct (Hu and Bentler, 1999; Hair, 2009). The values for composite reliability fell between 0.811 and 0.94, exceeding the recommended value of 0.70, and the AVE ranged from 0.587 to 0.767, thus establishing convergent validity. Discriminant validity was verified by using the Fornell and Larcker criteria (1981), according to which the value of the correlation between the constructs should be lower than 0.85, and the AVE of each construct should exceed the squared inter-correlations between latent constructs. In addition, the values of the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations between the latent constructs were less than 0.90 (Henseler et al., 2015). The convergent and discriminant validity criteria values are shown in Tables IV(a) and IV(b).

----- Insert Tables IV(a) and IV(b) here -----

*Hypotheses testing*

We tested the proposed relationships using the structural equation modelling technique (SEM). The fit indices indicated an acceptable model fit (*χ*2 = 589.03, *df* = 265, *p* < .000; *χ*2/*df* = 2.22, CFI = 0.966, NFI = 0.940, IFI = 0.966, RMSEA = 0.049, SRMR = 0.05). Next, we examined the direct effects hypothesized in our model and found that the impact of exposure to influencer content on self-discrepancy was positive and significant (*β* = 0.350, *p* < .001), supporting H1. The impact of self-discrepancy on positive affect (*β* = 0.207, *p <0.05)* and negative affect (*β* = 0.17, *p <0.05)* was also significant and positive, thus supporting H2(a) and H2(b) respectively. We next examined the impact of positive affect and negative affect on e-WOM. The impact of positive affect on e-WOM was positive and significant (*β* = 0.09, *p <0.05),* whereas the impact of negative affect on e-WOM was negative and significant (*β* = -0.12, *p <0.01)*. We also examined the impact of positive and negative affect on purchase intention. The impact of positive affect on purchase intention was positive and significant (*β* = 0.096, *p <0.05),* whereas the impact of negative affect on purchase intention was negative and significant (*β* = -0.126, *p <0.01).* Thus, H5 and H6 were supported. In addition, we tested the pathway from self-discrepancy to e-WOM and Purchase Intention through Positive and Negative affect using estimands and bootstrapping in AMOS 26 with a sample size of 2000 and 95% confidence interval. The results of this mediation analysis are summarized in Table V.

----- Insert Table V here -----

As prescribed by Collier (2020), we conducted the moderation analysis for continuous moderators using the interaction term method, which involved mean-centering the independent variable and the moderator before computing the product term. Mean centering is prescribed as it allows to account for possible multicollinearity issues (Dawson, 2014). We examined the moderating role of perceived homophily (PHom) on the relationship between exposure to influencer content (Expo) and self-discrepancy (SDis) and found a negative and significant moderating impact of PHom on the relationship (*β* = -0.082, *p <0.001*), thus supporting H3. Results of the slope analysis of the moderating effects are shown in figures 3(a) to (h). Next, we found that the impact of perceived homophily on the relationship between self-discrepancy and positive affect was positive and significant (*β* = 0.091, *p <0.05; figure 3(b*)), whereas it was negative but not significant in the case of negative affect (*β* = -0.053, *p >0.1)*. Thus H4(a) was supported, whereas H4(b) was rejected. We next examined the moderating impact of self-acceptance on the relationship between self-discrepancy and affect. We found a positive and significant moderating role of self-acceptance on the link between self-discrepancy and positive affect (*β* = 0.070, *p<0.01; figure 3(c)),* whereas the moderating impact of self-acceptance on the relation between self-discrepancy and negative affect was negative and significant (*β = -0.115, p<0.001; figure 3(d))*. Similarly, we found that mindfulness positively moderated the link between self-discrepancy and positive affect (*β* = 0.089, *p<0.01; figure 3(e)*) and negatively moderated the link between self-discrepancy and negative affect (*β* = -0.039, *p<0.1; figure 3(f))*. Thus, we found support for H7, H8, H9, and H10.

Next, we tested for the moderating role of perceived authenticity on the link between positive and negative affect and e-WOM and found that perceived authenticity strengthened the relationship between positive affect and e-WOM (*β* = 0.048, *p<0.05; figure 3(g)**)* and dampened the link between negative affect and e-WOM, but the effect was not significant *(β* = -0.002, *p>0.1)*. We also examined the impact of perceived authenticity on the link between affect and purchase intent and found that perceived authenticity strengthened the relationship between positive affect and purchase intent, but the effect was not significant *(β* = 0.004, *p>0.1)* and dampened the negative link between negative affect and purchase intent *(β* = 0.046, *p<0.05; figure 3(h))* Thus, we found support for H11(a) and H12(b), but not for H11(b) and H12(a). Finally, we examined the effect of categorical moderators like gender, age, and profession using multigroup analysis in AMOS 26 and found no significant differences between the restricted and unrestricted models (p>0.1) across these variables.

*Figure–3 - Moderation effects*

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**Discussion**

Across an emerging body of literature, there is preliminary evidence for how exposure to influencer marketing is associated with social comparisons that can shape an individual’s behavior (Hudders and Lou, 2022; Chae, 2018). Much of this discussion presupposes or argues for the potential impact of influencers on consumer behavior based on positive evaluations of influencers or perceptions of influencers as social standards or aspirational ideals (Li and Peng, 2021; Ahadzadeh et al., 2017). However, the factors shaping such perceptions of influencers as relevant standards or worthy ideals and their subsequent impact on consumer behavior are relatively unexplored (Zhang et al., 2021). Similarly, the question of how exposure to influencer marketing can drive 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 as ideal in a social space if it is admired or appreciated by a large number of people. Across our interviews, participants repeatedly identified influencers as social media standards and internalized the attributes and behaviors of the influencer as necessary for their ideal self. This observation was corroborated by our survey data where participants consistently gave similarly high ratings to their ideal self and the influencer on attractiveness items, appearance attractiveness serving as the dimension of comparison. When compared with one’s actual self, this ideal self, defined in relation to a particular influencer, can result in experiencing a gap or a self-discrepancy, which can further result in affective and behavioral outcomes (Higgins et al., 1987 Mandel et al., 2017). Notably, and in a departure from extant applications of self-discrepancy as a trait variable (e.g., Jin et al., 2019; Aw and Chuah, 2021), we thus examine how self-discrepancy may arise out of exposure to influencer content, and its subsequent impact on an individual’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.

In particular, there is evidence across extant literature for the psychological, affective, and cognitive impacts of self-discrepancy, which may, in turn, lead to behaviors directed at reducing the discrepancy (e.g., Carver and Scheier, 1990; Sela and Shiv, 2009). Consistent with these observations and across two studies, we observe how self-discrepancies arising out of exposure to influencer marketing can result in experiences of negative affect. This observation underscores the importance of the discussion on the ill-implications 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 well-being (Weinstein, 2018; Keles et al., 2020). In consequence, we observe how individuals turn 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 (Mandel et al., 2017; Tiggemann et al., 2020). Such experiences can be emotionally draining and can negatively impact an individual’s well-being, and this evidence relates to the prominent body of discussion on the dark side of social media and challenges associated with influencer marketing (Hudders and Lou, 2022; Dwivedi et al., 2021; Ahadzadeh et al., 2017).

However, we note that for comparisons with influencers, not all participants experienced negative affect and that alone. 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. This is an important contribution of our study, as it presents influencer marketing as a specific consumer context where self-discrepancies can lead to a parallel outcome along with the theoretically predicted negative affect, and to that extent, and as Phillips and Silvia (2005) argue, we engage in a theory enrichment exercise.

A potential explanation for experiencing such positive affect, despite experiencing a self-discrepancy, lies in how individuals perceive influencers, as compared to other content creators, celebrities, and social media users. On the one hand, influencers can serve as identity exemplars and sources of comparison (Li and Peng, 2021; Ahadzadeh et al., 2017). At the same time, they are also perceived as homophilic referents. Such perceptions of homophily are a very important feature that distinguishes influencers from traditional endorsers like celebrities. Individuals perceive influencers as similar to their own selves on attributes like background, values, appearance, and attitudes and, in turn, view them as more achievable and proximate standards for comparison than more heterophilic individuals (Taillon et al., 2020; Piehler et al., 2022). As a result, we observe the impact of perceived homophily on the relationship between exposure and self-discrepancy, such that the more homophilic an influencer is perceived to be, the lesser is the self-discrepancy experienced on exposure to his or her content. In addition, given that the salience of more achievable standards is greater than less achievable referents (Miceli and Castelfranchi, 2007), the impact of this discrepancy in terms of the affect experienced, as we find, is higher when perceived homophily is greater. As a result, participants report feeling more strongly, either negative or positive affect, when the source of discrepancy is a more homophilic than less homophilic referent, and to that end, we contribute to the discussion on the role played by perceived homophily in influencer marketing (Shoenberger and Kim, 2022; Bu et al., 2022).

In addition, we identify two psychological characteristics that explain consumer heterogeneity in affective outcomes or distinguish which individuals are more or less likely to experience positive (or negative) affect in relation to experiencing a self-discrepancy associated with exposure to influencer content. We note how self-acceptance and mindfulness play a significant role in enhancing (or dampening) positive (or negative) affect. For example, most participants describe how they compared their actual self with an ideal self defined in relation to the influencer, but as their degree of self-acceptance increased (which in itself can be a process that takes place over repeat exposures and a period of time), their ability to recognize the infeasibility of an ideal self as exemplified by the influencer, given their limitations and capabilities, improved. They could recognize and regulate when self-discrepancies were to be viewed as learning opportunities for an improved and attainable self and when they were to be disregarded as irrelevant, given their circumstances. Thus, more self-acceptant individuals reported more positive affective experiences, like feeling motivated and inspired, compared to less self-acceptant individuals who tended to view all comparisons, whether or not viable for them in their given circumstances, as reasons for negative affect.

We also report how mindfulness can manifest 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 were a true reflection of their offline or actual experiences. As Ryan and Deci (2000) contend, mindfulness can disengage an individual from automatic habits, thoughts, and behavioral patterns that may be unhealthy. By fostering more informed and self-regulated thoughts, responses, and behavior, it can thus result in happiness and well-being, and is found to enhance positive affect and reduce negative affect (Brown and Ryan, 2003). To that extent, we also contribute to the literature on influencer marketing and consumer well-being, and the role of psychological variables like mindfulness and self-acceptance in enhancing positive affect and dampening negative affect.

The importance of these observations surrounding perceptions of homophily, self-acceptance, and mindfulness stems from our subsequent observation that while positive affect has a positive and significant impact on e-WOM and purchase intention, the relationship is negative for negative affect. On the relation between affect and consumer behavior outcomes, extant research offers divergent perspectives. For instance, Xiao et al. (2018) document how consumers engage in symbolic consumption to signal an ideal self that is in greater alignment with influencers’ virtual self-presentations, offering consumption as a pathway to address the discomfort and negative affect arising out of experiencing the self-discrepancy. At the same time, Ki and Kim (2019) report how consuming influencer content can increase an individual’s desire to imitate the behaviors and attitudes displayed by influencers, driven by emotions such as motivation. We report that the more negative an individual feels in comparing himself/herself with an influencer, the less likely he or she is to engage in e-WOM or develop an intention to purchase the recommended product, with more positive affective experiences resulting in more favorable consumer behavior outcomes. To that end, our study contributes to this body of research that examines how such consumer behavior variables may arise in relation to self-discrepancies and affect.

What is noteworthy in this linkage, is the moderating role of the perceived authenticity of the influencer. As we note, it enhances the link between positive affect and e-WOM and dampens the negative relationship between negative affect and purchase intention. As a result, perceived authenticity can act as a mechanism for brands and influencers to enhance the positive relationship between positive affect arising out of experiencing self-discrepancies and consumer behavior and dampen the negative link between negative affect and consumer behavior.

Further, we find that participants’ judgments and behaviors towards an influencer’s recommendations depended on the extent to which they believed the influencer was telling the truth, both about the product/brand as well as his/her own experiences with it. In general, participants shared their misgivings about sponsored content and how they were likely to negatively evaluate the influencer as well as the endorsed brand if they identified it as sponsored content. Others described how their perceptions of the influencer’s authenticity may be negatively affected if the influencer engaged in paid promotions at the expense of consistency in her/his content or expressed views. At the same time, others shared that even if a post was sponsored, they were likely to cut the influencer some slack, especially because they perceived that influencers needed to present an authentic self if they were to gain and retain followers. Such perceptions of authenticity are developed over time and play an important role in driving behavioral responses towards influencer promotions.

**Theoretical Implications**

This paper engages with and contributes to notably three streams of literature. First, we add to the emerging body of literature on influencer marketing by examining a relatively understudied domain – how does exposure to influencer marketing shape consumer behavior via its impact on an individual’s self-concept? Across two studies, we study how influencers, by virtue of being followed or admired by a large number of followers, can shape individuals’ ideal self, and how self-discrepancies arising out of such exposure may subsequently impact consumer behavior. In addition, we identify and study the variables that are instrumental in shaping this outcome and offer mechanisms through which the eventual consumer response to influencer marketing can be made more favorable, and at the same time, can reduce the negative impact of influencer marketing on an individual’s psychological well-being. Perceived homophily and authenticity are increasingly being discussed in the influencer marketing literature, and our study contributes to that stream by situating them in the hitherto unexplored context of self-discrepancy and individual affect arising out of exposure to influencer content. We also argue that while discrepancies can lead to both positive and negative affect, the former is likely to have a favorable relationship with e-WOM and purchase intent, while the latter has a negative relationship with e-WOM and purchase intent.

In addition, we contribute to the literature on self-discrepancies in one of two ways. We examine how self-discrepancies arise out of exposure to influencer content by shaping the individuals’ ideal self in alignment with the behaviors and attributes of individuals perceived as social ideals. This is an extension of extant understandings of self-discrepancies in the context of influencer marketing, whereby scholars have examined self-discrepancy as a trait variable (e.g., Jin et al., 2019; Aw and Chuah, 2021; Hu et al., 2020). By arguing how self-discrepancy can arise as an outcome of exposure to influencer content, we operationalize self-discrepancy as a state variable, and find evidence for the impact of exposure to influencer content versus non-influencer content on inducing self-discrepancies.

In the case of exposure to influencer content, we also identify a consumption context where individuals may experience a positive affect on noticing a gap between their ideal and actual self, in a marked departure from extant understandings of self-discrepancy, notably the self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987). The theory argues that negative affect and that alone should be an outcome of an experience of self-discrepancies. In the specific case of exposure to influencers, we find that self-discrepancies can lead to both positive and negative affect, the former being exemplified by emotions such as enthusiasm, feeling inspired, and a drive to achieve that ideal self, and thus engage in a theory-building exercise (Phillips and Silvia, 2005).

Notably, we also engage with the literature on self-acceptance and mindfulness, two variables that can have several implications for explaining how consumers make sense of their experiences online but continue to remain unexplored in the specific context of influencer marketing. There is some discussion in practice on how consumption of social media content may, at times, be viewed as mindless, given the automaticity and continuous supply of content in the form of pictures and videos (e.g., Świątek et al., 2023). We find that more mindful individuals tend to interpret gaps between their ideal and actual self as opportunities for growth and reasons to feel inspired, motivated, and determined to achieve that ideal, mindful of what is likely to be plausible and what is likely to be fake or staged and thus, not viable as an ideal self. In addition, we find how self-acceptance influences the nature of affect experienced upon identifying a gap between one’s ideal and actual self, notably when the ideal self is defined based on an external referent. As the only study to document such effects with respect to self-discrepancies and the impact of influencer marketing, this paper can serve as a starting point for future studies to examine how self-acceptance and mindfulness can be enhanced, and whether influencers and marketers themselves can play a role in this process.

**Managerial Implications**

Recent influencer marketing statistics indicate potential opportunities, like earnings of about USD 5.2 for every USD 1 investment in influencer marketing (Influencer Marketing Hub Report, 2022). This highlights the opportunities in reduced costs and improved reach through influencer marketing, but also underscores the importance of exploring how individuals’ behaviors are shaped by influencers, and the impact of the influencer-follower exchange on consumer behavior. In addition, given that much of an individual’s experience on social media platforms revolves around a process of expressing, defining, observing, and re-defining their self-concept vis a vis others’ self-presentation, there is a need to understand how exposure to influencer content can shape an individual’s behavior by influencing the domains of her/his self-concept.

To that extent, we undertake a detailed examination of how individuals identify, associate with, and follow the recommendations made by influencers, and the role of self-discrepancies in shaping such relationships and outcomes. We provide empirical support for more positive rather than negative experiences of exposure to influencer content as more conducive to the generation of positive e-WOM and purchase intentions. While self-discrepancies may be inevitable upon exposure to others perceived as socially ideal referents, they can result in both positive and negative affect, and we argue that firms can see greater effectiveness of influencer marketing initiatives if they shape consumer behavior via feelings of motivation and inspiration rather than vulnerability or distress. The observation highlights how managers can prioritize positive affective experiences of consumers in association with influencer marketing campaigns for their brands to drive favorable consumer behavior outcomes. It also cautions against presenting unrelatable or unattainable ideals that can result in negative affective experiences, as also evidenced across our discussion on perceived homophily, and therefore, result in less favorable consumer behavioral outcomes.

Further, we provide insights on how perceptions of authenticity can impact the link between exposure to influencer content and the eventual behavior of the consumer in a direction in favor of or against the brand/product. For instance, we posit that managers can make informed decisions about their choice of influencers and the content to be used for their marketing campaigns by carefully assessing the perceived authenticity of the influencer and her/his content. Some factors that affect such perceptions tend to be perceptions of how biased/unbiased the content appears, disclosures on whether it is a paid endorsement or otherwise, interpretations of a lack of disclosures where purchase intent is evident, and an overall assessment of the influencer’s online self-presentation efforts as representative of their actual experiences or as staged content which may or may not be real or feasible.

Our study also highlights potential recommendations for marketers and influencers from a consumer welfare perspective.We provide empirical evidence for the role of self-acceptance and mindfulness in shaping the nature of affect experienced by an individual on experiencing a self-discrepancy – the two constructs are powerfully associated with consumer well-being and favorably impact e-WOM and Purchase Intention, yet we do not find any discussion on their importance or applicability in either practice or theory. Managers and influencers can thus focus on building meaningful relationships with social media users (followers/prospective consumers) by presenting an authentic and homophilic self/content. An individual’s self-acceptance and degree of mindfulness can enhance the positive affect experienced by individuals on comparing their ideal self (as defined by the attributes of the influencer) and actual self in favor of the endorsed brand.

**Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Influencer marketing is a relatively new consumer context - with much of the literature on influencer marketing emerging in the last two to three years, it remains a fertile ground for examining multiple concepts, constructs, and phenomena in conjunction with which it may operate as an effective marketing strategy. In the present paper, we direct our attention to the question of how influencer marketing affects consumer behavior by impacting the individual’s notions of their actual and ideal self. Naturally, while we try to cover multiple dimensions and facets of this linkage, our studies possess several limitations. For our qualitative study, we focus on information-rich cases from the most important demographic that consumes influencer content, and go on to examine the linkages hypothesized on the basis of this study using a survey design. While the qualitative approach allows us to dive deep into personal experiences related to the self-concept and the survey method allows us to examine the validity of our findings across a larger sample, there is scope for theoretical and methodological improvement. Our study can serve as a starting point for subsequent works on examining, in greater detail, each of the aforementioned pathways, and identifying the boundary conditions of our observations and other enablers of influencer marketing effectiveness.

For instance, we provide insights into the role of self-acceptance, mindfulness, and perceived authenticity of influencers in shaping affect and behavior arising from self-discrepancies. At the same time, it is worth noting that these variables themselves deserve more attention and can be examined in more detail in future studies. For instance, what factors 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. In addition, while we examine perceived authenticity with respect to influencers followed by the respondents, we presuppose a period of time over which such perceptions may have developed. Future studies can improve upon our approach by employing more longitudinal designs to examine how authenticity itself is developed over time, and what factors can negatively impact such perceptions.

In addition, while we focus on appearance-related influencers and discrepancies, individuals may experience discrepancies related to intellect, finances, travel etc., thereby presenting alternate dimensions of self-appraisals and consumer behavior that can be examined (this was observed in our qualitative work). Similarly, while we focus on products that vary in social acceptability/appropriateness, we restrict ourselves to products in the appearance category. Future studies can examine consumption that may vary on other dimensions, such as the nature of consumption (utilitarian versus hedonic, regular versus occasional etc.) or the type of value associated with the consumption (e.g., functional versus symbolic). In addition, while we employ interviews and survey methodology to develop a framework linking exposure to influencer content, self-discrepancy, affect and behavior (including the moderating role of perceived homophily, self-acceptance, mindfulness, and perceived authenticity), future studies can examine these links using causal designs like lab- or field-experiments and add nuance to our understandings.

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