

Dark Side of Being Influenced: A study on the Adverse Impacts of Influencer-Generated Content

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ABSTRACT

Influencer-generated content has become a regular part of everyday digital life and has attracted growing academic attention because of its influence on users' emotions, behaviours, and social experiences. Existing research has extensively examined both the positive and negative outcomes of influencer-led communication, particularly in relation to consumption behaviour and psychological responses. Building on this body of work, the present narrative review synthesises prior theoretical and empirical studies to bring together current insights on how continuous exposure to influencer content affects user well-being. The review identifies reliable evidence related to the repeated exposure to the well-edited material on lifestyle, luxury, and food topics and the development of anxiety, insecurity, fear of missing out, and compulsive social media usage. In addition to these personal emotional implications, there are other social implications that are mentioned in the literature, such as decreased offline communication and erosion of social bonds in real life. Besides, the functions of content authenticity, media literacy, and mindful digital engagement are also discussed in the paper, which designates them as significant variables that can facilitate the minimization of these adverse implications. This review combines marketing, psychological and media research, providing a clear and in-depth insight into the emotional, behavioural and social consequences of consuming content of influencers and emphasizes the role of more balanced and conscious use of digital platforms.

Keywords: Influencer-Generated Content, Impact, Digital, Content Consumption

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INTRODUCTION

The role of digital media in the modern life is a part of life and fundamentally changes the way people communicate, learn, and interact. The development of social media social networks, including Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat, has reinvented the trend of online consumption with billions of subscribers worldwide. Statista (2024) reports that Instagram and YouTube each had more than two billion monthly active users, and Snapchat had over 500 million users around the world. In India, most of the users of social media fall in the age group of 18-25 and 31 percent use at least six to nine platforms at a time, the youth on social media spend two to three hours a day using these platforms (IAMAI, 2023).

The social media come with a lot of advantages to users through instant access to information, social networking and the creation of online communities. It enables people to express themselves, exchange

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their personal experiences, and find like-minded people in a manner that had not previously existed due to traditional media (Kapitan and Silvera, 2016; Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2015). The digital platforms have also served as a crucial channel of learning and inspiration, as users find out about the tips to live their lives, imaginative ideas and various insights of content creators and influencers (Jin and Phua, 2014; Lou and

Yuan, 2019). Such interactions can help not only to make users more knowledgeable but also to give them a sense of belonging and emotional well-being (König and Maier, 2024; Campbell and Farrell, 2020).

Additionally, the social media creates a culture of participation where people can actively contribute to the production, distribution and response of content, instead of being mere consumers. Such participatory space empowers people, enables creativity, and reinforces digital literacy. Consequently, social media has become an important instrument of self-development, social networking, and interaction, enabling the users to have enriching experiences that transcend geographical and cultural borders (Brown and Hayes, 2008; Freberg et al., 2011; Godey et al., 2016).

But the past ten years have seen a change in the functionality of social media, and social media is no longer a simple tool of communication but a complicated ecosystem with the primary suppliers being influencer-generated content (IGC). Aspirational modes of life which focus on luxury, beauty, fitness, and consumption are commonly marketed by influencers in carefully edited and aesthetically pleasing posts (Marwick, 2015; Tiggemann and Slater, 2014). This kind of content, though entertaining and motivational, includes a subtle influence on the perception, desires, and actions of users, making the distinction between reality and idealization unclear. Even though most of the current literature has focused on the positive implications of the phenomenon, which are increased brand awareness, consumer interaction, and interpersonal gains (Boerman et al., 2017), new studies have started reporting on its less apparent effects. There is a mounting concern regarding the emotional, relational, and behavioural stress that may have been brought about by an incessant encounter with idealized influencer content (Kuss and Griffiths, 2017; Przybylski et al., 2013).

It is against this context of the background that the dark side of influenced needs to be examined in detail, the inherent psychological and social expenses that go hand in hand with the seemingly good world of media influenced by influencers. With the ever-growing rise of influencer-created content in the online user experience, it is important to learn how such content affects their well-being and social behaviour. Therefore, this research is set out to investigate:

RQ1. How does exposure to influencer-generated content affect users' well-being and social behaviour?

Addressing this question offers deeper insight into the

psychological and social consequences of influencer content consumption. It also provides critical implications for users, content creators, brands, and policymakers seeking to foster healthier and more balanced forms of digital engagement in an era dominated by social influence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Influencer-Generated Content

The digital influencers have become the opinion leaders in the digital ecosystem; through their content work in the industries of food, lifestyle, fitness, and aesthetics, they influence the social norms and the consumer behavior. The reasons why users have used such content are founded on the identification of tendencies, identity strengthened, surveillance, and inspiration to create (Lee et al., 2021; Croes and Bartels, 2021).

Such a presentation of visible lifestyle imagery or amenities, in turn, on the platforms such as Instagram, is a form of normative influence, hence making digital influencers seem as a specialist source of authority, thereby having users follow their advice on a product or experience (Chae, 2018; Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). Because influencers integrate the elements of entertainment, self-presentation, and social belonging (Sheldon and Bryant, 2016), their posts are a symbolic resource and a philosophy of persuasion, and, therefore, can change norms in the field of taste, consumption, and identity at the microlevel.

User Well-being and Social Media

Along with the entertainment, information and knowledge advantages, social media has a number of psychological and emotional advantages that make it a positive influence on the well being of users. It can be viewed as a medium of rest and relaxation and it offers people with pleasant distractions and times of rest in their everyday lives (Vorderer et al., 2004). Another benefit of social networking settings is that they allow users to offer emotional support to each other, have empathy, and create networks that make them feel like they belong to a group and are receiving social support (Burke et al., 2011; DeAndrea et al., 2012). Such online communications may reinforce the perception of social connection, which, despite its virtuality, makes people feel like a part of their online communities and valued by it. Moreover, social media stimulates self-expression, identity exploration, and social involvement, which, as it has been established, facilitate psychological resilience and satisfaction



with life (Latikka et al., 2022; Twenge et al., 2019). Confidence and motivation due to communication with online communities, as well as healthy lifestyle habits, including inspiration to be fit and motivated about self-care can also be strengthened (Luna, 2018; Sanzari et al., 2023). Moreover, self-acceptance and a better attitude of users to appearance and well-being could be achieved through exposure to various viewpoints and body-positive movements on platforms (Marks et al., 2020; Vandenbosch et al., 2022). By combining all these advantages, it can be seen that social media can be used positively to increase emotional stability, social bond, and overall psychological health.

METHODOLOGY

The narrative review method was employed in the paper in discussing the adverse psychological and social effects of influencer content on the welfare of users. The selection of the relevant theoretical and empirical literature was purposeful, in order to provide a comprehensive picture of the degree of impact of repeated exposure to highly edited content of lifestyle, luxury, and food-related influencers on the feelings, cognition, and socializing of the users.

The conceptual relevance to the overall topic of the dark side of influencer consumption and contribution to the theories of social comparison, self-discrepancy, digital dependency, and emotional well-being served as the inclusion criteria. The articles that form part of the current narrative review were retrieved in reputable academic databases and the most popular peer-reviewed journals in the area of marketing, psychology, and media and communication studies. The sources were mostly journals that are included in databases like the Web of science and the Google Scholar. In the review, the researchers searched well-referenced and conceptually sound studies on influencer-created content, social media usage, psychological well-being, behavioural consequences, and social interactions. The studies have been located through the use of a number of repetitive reading and cross-referencing of studies though there were no strict inclusion or exclusion criteria as the focus was made on those studies that contained either theoretical or empirical evidence regarding the emotional, behavioural and social impact of influencer engagement.

The works selected were each discussed thoroughly and the qualitative analysis of the works conducted so that it is possible to find common themes, tensions in concepts, and models of explanations. This

comprehensive and interpretative approach simplified the synthesis of diverse opinions and integrative theoretical understanding of the ways in which influencer-created content could be implicated in the formation of anxiety, insecurity, compulsive online behaviours, and reduced real-life relationships and establish the potential moderating role of authenticity and mindful engagement.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal a multidimensional impact of influencer-generated content on users' emotional, behavioural, and social well-being.

Emotional Outcomes: Anxiety, Insecurity, and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)

Multiple exposure to intensively edited images of luxury and lifestyle on social media stimulates upward social comparison tendencies in users (Chae, 2018; Han et al., 2025) and self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987). These comparisons eventually lead to feelings of incompetence, worry and a sense of persistent insecurity in terms of looks, material wealth and social prominence, which are frequently exacerbated by idealistic content by influencers (Gupta and Sharma, 2025). Such depictions sustain a perceived difference between the real and aspirational self of users and lead to emotional dissonance, which is expressed in a lack of satisfaction with personal attainment and daily experience (Li et al., 2025).

This emotional susceptibility is enhanced by the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) where users are made to feel left out of good moments documented by influencers and friends (Przybylski et al., 2013; Wang and Lee, 2025). Recent research attests to FOMO as the cause of anxiety, obsessive content inspection, and reduced satisfaction with offline living, especially among younger adults (Dossey, 2014; Abel et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2025). It is social media exposure that moderates these effects to connect upward comparisons to materialistic desires and financial stress (Smith and Johnson, 2024).

Curated food and travel content similarly induces dissatisfaction with ordinary meals and routines, as users encounter overhyped visuals that rarely match reality (Travel Insights Survey, 2025). This reinforces deficit feelings, with 33% of travelers reporting disappointment in social media-inspired dining due to misleading portrayals (MMGY Global, 2025). Platforms' unvetted recommendations exacerbate this, leading to overcharging and unmet expectations in everyday experiences (McKinsey Travel Report, 2024)

Behavioural Dependency: Compulsive Scrolling and Normative Reliance

It is reported that influencer content consumption has become some kind of a digital dependency, which is characterized by compulsive scrolling, habitual checking (Andreassen et al., 2016; van den Eijnden et al., 2016; Li et al., 2025). Social media creates intermittent rewards, such as likes, comments, and aesthetic satisfaction, which are the drivers of this behavioural loop (Dhir et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2025). As a result, consumers are becoming dependent on the aesthetics of influencers and the assumed social standards, including outfits, vacation trends, or the way food is served, to make daily decisions at the expense of individuality (Gupta & Sharma, 2025).

This behavioural conformity behaviour is in line with the normative influence theory (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004), where people conform to perceived social norms in the cost of their own individual preferences (Han et al., 2025). With digital interaction becoming routine, users become habituated: the enjoyment of consumption wanes and dependency grows, creating a subtle but ongoing loop of compulsive use and lack of self-control (Wang & Lee, 2025)

Social Consequences: Diminished Real-World Connection and Social Isolation

An accumulating number of studies show that individuals devoting time to the content shared by influencers might substitute traditional social relationships and community involvement, weakening human connections and ties. Emotional investment is becoming more based on the relationships between people that are close and remote between the digital personas leading to social seclusion and isolation (Krzystanek & Krok, 2020). The use of smartphones during social activities, such as socializing, affects physical interaction and lowers the satisfaction of the relation (Luna, 2018). This slow replacement of the offline interaction with the digital immersion is a massive social loss of influencer-mediated consumption.

Buffers and Moderators: Authenticity, Media Literacy, and Mindful Engagement

The adverse psychological and social impacts of influencer-generated content may be mitigated through three key buffers: authenticity, media literacy, and mindfulness. Perceived authenticity in influencer communication can reduce the intensity of social comparison and promote more genuine engagement

(Audrezet et al., 2018). Likewise, media literacy, defined as users' critical awareness of persuasive and curated media portrayals, enables individuals to evaluate content more objectively and resist unrealistic standards (Livingstone, 2004). Finally, mindful and purpose-driven engagement strategies, such as scheduled usage or reflective consumption, have been shown to decrease compulsive scrolling and emotional distress (Carpenter et al., 2019). Collectively, these moderators form essential protective mechanisms against the emotional, behavioral, and social costs associated with influencer-generated

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study reveal that influencer-generated content profoundly shapes users' emotions, behaviors, and perceptions in the digital space. Exposure to idealized lifestyles, aesthetic perfection, and luxury-oriented imagery on social media cultivates upward social comparison, heightening anxiety, dissatisfaction, and self-discrepancy (Chae, 2018; Higgins, 1987). This aligns with prior research suggesting that curated influencer portrayals reinforce unrealistic standards, generating feelings of inadequacy among followers (Vandenbosch, et al., 2022). Such emotional disruption highlights the ethical responsibility of influencers to portray authenticity and imperfection, as genuine self-presentation strengthens trust and fosters psychological relief for audiences (Audrezet et al., 2018). In the case of brands and companies, these insights imply that working with the influencers who reflect a notion of authenticity and transparency is more powerful strategically, as more and more audiences are attracted to the relatable stories instead of flawless looks (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Compulsive engagement predisposition in this paper is indicative of the addictive nature of social media, which encourages people to engage repeatedly and reduces self-control by rewarding users with algorithms and infinite scrolling (Andreassen et al., 2016; van den Eijnden et al., 2016). Users are often caught in a loop of comparison and review where they are encouraged through validation cues (likes and comments) and become dependent over time, resulting in a lack of emotional autonomy and increased dependency.

This implies the users must take the proactive steps of mindful engagement, including the regulation of the time spent on it, managing feeds, and employing reflective consumption habits to ensure that their mental health does not suffer (Carpenter et al., 2019).



Influencers can also be helpful by minimizing manipulative engagement strategies such as clickbait titles or over posting and promote digital breaks and self-care messages.

This can be contributed to by brands and companies creating marketing campaigns that compensate meaningful engagement over compulsive consumption, and creating awareness of the well-being of digital life alongside their products. The discoveries also suggest increased conflict between virtual association and real solitude. The parasocial relationships substitute real intimacy as more and more people are emotionally engaged in the lives of influencers, which leads to the development of loneliness and the reduction of social satisfaction (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Krzystanek & Krok, 2020). The emotional momentum that previously went to personal relationships is now occupied by the virtual ones, leaving real interaction between people limited. Thus, the influencers as well as the users have to make a conscious decision to balance digital and in-person socialization. Influencers can help restore social connectedness by creating content that encourages offline activities, community involvement, and shared well-being, while users can reclaim social balance through deliberate “digital detox” periods and real-world participation.

The other emotional tendency that has been brought about by the results is the fear of missing out, which helps provoke constant content checking and fears of being excluded (Przybylski et al., 2013; Abel et al., 2016). The engagement that is triggered by FOMO can not only cause additional pressure on a person but also predisposes them to impulsive consumption.

To counteract this, influencers and marketers should substitute scarcity-focused persuasion with inclusive and value-based narrative growth of a sense of belonging instead of exclusivity. In their turn, users are able to deal with FOMO by selecting positive content exposure and consuming media that foster self-development and relatedness instead of comparison.

The implication of these results to the society at large is that it requires ethical, educational and regulatory interventions. The governments and policymakers can have a central role in this by working to introduce digital literacy and emotional resilience in the school curriculums so that young users find it easier to analyze how influencers display themselves and the motive behind advertising it (Livingstone, 2004).

Regulatory agencies and platform designers should implement ethical principles of algorithms that enhance user welfare, including time warning, content proportion, and disclosure of sponsorship. In the case of brands, long-term credibility and corporate image can be reinforced by responsible interactions with influencers who spread the ideas of sustainable consumption and mental health awareness.

On the whole, this paper highlights that the culture of influencers, despite being at the center of the contemporary digital marketing process, has serious emotional and social implications. To overcome these issues, it is a collective duty: influencers need to focus on authenticity and psychological comfort in their content; users need to develop a sense of critical thinking and self-control; brands need to align their promotional activities with ethically responsible narration; policymakers need to promote healthier relationships online by educating and regulating. Ultimately, fostering a balanced influencer ecosystem depends on restoring equilibrium between digital inspiration and human well-being, ensuring that social media becomes a source of connection, authenticity, and empowerment rather than comparison and compulsion.

Limitations and Future Directions

Future studies can study cross-cultural differences (e.g., collectivist vs individualist contexts), which also warrant exploration.

Future studies might also explore positive-dark trade-offs, for example, whether exposure to aspirational content motivates personal growth or goal-setting for some users, while simultaneously inducing emotional costs for others. Mixed-methods designs could unpack nuanced user experiences, distinguishing between “empowered aspirants” and “affected comparers.”

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights the subtle yet significant psychological and social consequences of influencer-generated content. Continuous exposure to idealized lifestyles fosters anxiety, insecurity, and digital dependency while diminishing real-world connections and satisfaction with everyday life. The findings underscore the need for authenticity in influencer communication, media literacy among users, and responsible marketing practices by brands and policymakers. Promoting mindful engagement and ethical digital behaviour can help restore balance

between inspiration and well-being in the influencer-driven media environment.

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