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The Role of Social Comparison in Influencer Marketing: How Consumer Self-Esteem Shapes Attitudes Toward Sponsored Content

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Abstract. In this digital age, influencer marketing is becoming the go-to promotional tool; however, the approach isn't effective for all audiences and raises the question of what psychological mechanisms are at play. This study seeks to answer how consumers' social comparison (upward versus downward), interact with their self-esteem (high versus low) and self-efficacy (perceived ability) to influence attitudes towards sponsored content (from influencers) and intention to purchase. This literature review adopts a literature review methodology to collate findings from past studies. They find that upward social comparison (USC) assists high self-efficacy/self-esteem consumers but harms low self-efficacy/self-esteem ones, downward social comparison (DSC) having the opposite effect – though too much DSC can lead one to complacency. Contextual authenticity and relevance play mediating roles. The researchers determined that influencer marketing effectiveness relies on the interplay between characteristics of influencer content and individual differences. They advise brands and influencers to segment audiences; design specific messages; accordingly, select the most suitable influencers; and disclose sponsored content to maximize and improve campaign effectiveness and trustworthiness while suggesting directions for future longitudinal and cross-cultural research.

Keywords: Social Comparison, Influencer Marketing, Self-Esteem, Self-Efficacy, Sponsored Content.

1. Introduction

In the din of the digital age, influencer marketing reigns supreme, with brands pouring billions of dollars each year into deals with digitally-savvy social media influencers. Unlike traditional advertising, influencer marketing leverages the credibility and relational capital of influencers to foster authentic connections with consumers [1]. The success of influencer marketing varies massively from one audience to another, and so it's no surprise that scholars are looking into the psychology behind the consumer's response to influencers promoting brands and products. Social comparison theory, proposed by Festinger, provides a valuable framework for understanding these dynamics, as social media platforms inherently facilitate upward (comparing oneself to those

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perceived as superior) and downward (comparing oneself to those perceived as inferior) social comparisons [2].

Consumer self-esteem and self-efficacy are critical individual differences that modulate the impact of social comparison on marketing outcomes [3]. While previous research has examined social comparison in the context of social media use and influencer credibility, to our knowledge, there are few investigations of how the combination of social comparison and self-constructs influences attitudes and sales intentions toward sponsored content [4].

This gap is important because brands and influencers need actionable insights from research to create campaigns that work for everyone. This paper adopts the literature review methodology to examine and critique the disjointed findings from the fields of marketing and psychology. This methodology is applied to respond to the question of this literature review: In what manner do consumers' social comparison tendencies (upward vs downward) and self-esteem levels interact to influence attitudes toward sponsored content and purchase intentions. This review draws upon and synthesizes findings from peer-reviewed papers published in top marketing, psychology, and communication journals to integrate fragmented research into a single coherent examination of the topic. This research is significant in bridging psychological theory and marketing practice to understand why some consumers accept sponsored content and others reject it.

2. Core concepts

2.1. Social comparison

Festinger defined social comparison as the inherent human tendency to evaluate one's opinions and abilities by comparing oneself to others [2]. Wood extended the framework to see such comparisons as "upward social comparison" (USC)—where we hold ourselves against those we see as better, prettier, smarter—and "downward social comparison" (DSC)—where we hold ourselves against those who are worse [3]. On social media, the "upwards social comparisons" will occur when influencers display idealized views of themselves, their goods or their achievements. The "downwards social comparisons" will take place when an influencer shares their struggles or "ordinary" [5]. Social comparison on an online platform tends to be frequent, accessible and curate which to some extent exacerbates self-evaluative tendencies making it a compelling influencer [6].

2.2. Self-esteem

Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall evaluation of their self-worth, which in marketing contexts determines susceptibility to social influence [7]. It is expected to be relatively stable: high self-esteem individuals are likely to demonstrate confidence in their judgmental and/or social capabilities and to regard themselves relatively positively, while low self-esteem individuals will generally be somewhat self-critical, self-conscious, sensitive to social comparison and outside judgment [8]. In persuasive message marketing contexts, self-esteem affects consumers' perceptions of persuasive messages by affecting the perceived similarity and relevance of the influencer and brand: low self-esteem consumers may be more easily influenced by social influence methods, while high self-esteem consumers will be less likely to capitulate [9].

2.3. Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy, one of the core elements of social cognitive theory, refers to an individual's beliefs regarding their ability to successfully engage in a specific behavior [10]. In the context of consumer

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behavior, self-efficacy is relevant to how consumers perceive their ability to engage with the product, learn about it before purchasing it, or mimic the behavior typical of the influencer [11]. Whereas self-esteem refers to a global evaluation, self-efficacy is specific to a domain - a consumer may have high self-efficacy in choosing skincare items but low self-efficacy in buying tech gadgets [10].

2.4. Influencer marketing and sponsored content

Influencer marketing is a type of social media marketing that relies on recommendations from people with devoted followings in a niche area of product expertise (e.g. beauty, fitness, travel). Sponsored content is paid for and is when influencers plug brands into their posts, stories, and videos etc., disguising it as an authentic recommendation [12]. The power of sponsored content hinges on authenticity, influencer credibility, and relevance of influencers, brands, and audiences to one another [1]. For example, fitness influencer sponsoring sportswear.

3. The impact of social comparison and self-esteem on influencer marketing

3.1. Upward Social Comparison (USC) and self-esteem

Research points to the two-sided impact of USC on consumer responses to sponsored content and its moderation by self-esteem. For the high-esteem consumer, USC produces positive benefits more often as it emphasizes aspirational motivation and self-improvement goals. Lee and Watkins found that high self-esteem participants perceived social media influencers as more inspirational than threatening due to upward comparison [13]. That means that as they do not view those influencers as rivals or opponents, they in turn think favorably about the products they promote as facilitators of achieving those motives [6]. For example, a fitness brand attempting to market their workout gear to high self-esteem consumers through fitness influencers may see a surge in those consumer's purchases of gear when promoted by them.

Conversely, the low self-esteem consumer faces the inverse, a negative effect of USC. Vogel et al. conducted a longitudinal study of 198 social media users, with the finding that low self-esteem participants who often made upward comparisons with others reported increases in feelings of inadequacy, a correlating predictor of negative attitudes toward social media [6]. The lifestyle presented by the influencer seemed untouchable to them. Mohan further noted that low self-esteem consumers are more likely to detect "inauthenticity" in sponsored content during USC, as they view the influencer’s endorsement as a reminder of their own perceived shortcomings [14].

3.2. Downward Social Comparison (DSC) and self-esteem

Several unique experiences resulted from EUC across levels of self-esteem, with DSC in particular eliciting positive responses because it restores self-evaluation and fosters perceived similarity. Yet the nuances of the magnitude of the effect vary across self-esteem levels. High self-esteem consumers may experience modest benefits from DSC (i.e., reinforcing self-worth), but are less likely to be affected by sponsored content as they have strong self-evaluations [3]. Low self-esteem consumers derive greater psychological benefits from DSC, which acts to elevate their attitudes towards sponsored content. Chen et al. found that low self-esteem individuals who compared themselves to influencers sharing relatable failures (e.g., a beauty influencer struggling with a skincare issue) experienced increased self-acceptance, in turn gaining greater trust in the influencer and propensity to purchase the promoted product [11].

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DSC's effectiveness can be attributed to social anxiety reduction and perceived similarity. When influencers present "imperfect" experiences, low self-esteem consumers feel more connected to influencers, viewing the sponsored content as sharing rather than promoting [4]. For example, a fashion influencer with whom a low self-esteem consumer connects (i.e., "everyday people") wearing affordable clothes may resonate in a deeper way as the sponsored content is perceived as informative rather than aspirational [1]. On the other hand, too much DSC might lead consumers to feel complacent dictating that influencers infuse parts of their lives that do not suck; high self-esteem consumers are oblivious to sponsored content if influencer is too inferior, hinting that influencer messaging must balance relatability and aspiration [3].

3.3. The interaction effect of social comparison and self-esteem

The interplay of social comparison tendencies with self-esteem is present in a key moderator of purchase intentions. Following social comparison theory, Sääksjärvi et al. conducted a series of experiments with female consumers manipulating whether the celebrity endorser had an attractive versus unattractive public image to study changes in these women's self-esteem and purchase intentions [15]. Through these studies, exposure to positively viewed, attractive celebrity (upward comparison target) temporarily decreased consumers' self-esteem, while exposure to a celebrity with negative or unattractive public image (downward comparison target) increased self-esteem. The authors found that for women low in true self-esteem, exposure to attractive celebrity leads to lower purchase intentions for the products endorsed, while for women high in true self-esteem purchase intentions did not significantly vary across attractive and unattractive celebrities. This interaction effect suggests that marketers may benefit from assessing the audience's self-esteem level prior to deciding whether to feature idealized or relatable influencers.

Prior studies find that in a digital advertising context, message characteristics and social comparison processes influence consumers' attitude toward advertising or sponsored content, which then influences their purchase intentions [16,17]. For high self-esteem consumers, USC positively influences attitude, which influences purchase intentions positively. For low self-esteem consumers, DSC influences attitude positively, while USC influences attitude negatively and reduces purchase intentions. These findings align with social comparison theory's premise that consequences of comparison depend on the self-concept of the individual but show that the moderation of this influence depends on contextual and cultural factors [2].

4. The impact of social comparison and self-efficacy on influencer marketing

4.1. Upward Social Comparison (USC) and self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is also crucial in how consumers react to a type of USC known as influencer marketing. For consumers with higher self-efficacy, the influencers are more like informational sources or motivational sources because they believe they can also succeed with the products. Bandura argued that the model being more similar to oneself and the behavior `modelling' being seen as feasible can increase the self-efficacy expectancy since they engage in vicarious learning through social comparison [10]. Chen et al. concluded that individuals with high self-efficacy after exposure to USC convey that their confidence in their ability to use the workout equipment of the influencer has increased, increasing attitude towards the products and finally purchase intention [11].

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Low self-efficacy consumers cannot gain anything from USC unless influencers make the right presentation cues that will help them feel more competent. Haferkamp and Krämer noted that individuals with low self-efficacy feel the distributions with other influencers is too far to a make a leap when it comes to struggling with perspectives that make a person feel helpless and stop interacting with sponsored content. For instance, a consumer with low self-efficacy watches a makeup influencer make a certain eye-look with multiple eye brushes where the user feels the products as far "too advanced" for them to engage thereby implying USC is most effective for low self-efficacy consumers if influencers increase perceived self-efficacy by giving correct step nuggets [4,10].

4.2. Downward Social Comparison (DSC) and self-efficacy

DSC strengthens or weakens consumer responses depending on self-efficacy. High self-efficacy consumers may be put off DSC entirely and find it patronizing, meaning that the brand's credibility suffers as they do not need to prove their abilities by comparing themselves to inferior others [3].Extending research showing that self-efficacy and self-esteem moderate the effect of socially threatening appeals on brand attitudes and purchase intentions, this study suggests that high efficacy consumers may be offended if an influencer appears to struggle with a baseline product, perceiving a low-quality item, such as the sponsored item, as unequipped for their own needs [2].

In contrast to high self-efficacy consumers, DSC benefits low self-efficacy consumers by alleviating performance anxiety and enhancing perceived competence. Lee and Watkins surveyed 250 beauty product consumers and found that low self-efficacy individuals who practiced DSC with influencers who made makeup mistakes had greater self-efficacy towards using the promoted product and greater purchase intentions [13]. DSC helps low self-efficacy consumers realize "even influencers struggle," thus normalizing their own insecurities and making the product seem more attainable [6]. A history of DSC that undermines self-efficacy by fostering dependence rather than mastery is not helpful to the consumer. Consumers may engage in downward comparisons rather than truly acquire skills themselves [3].

4.3. The interaction effect of social comparison and self-efficacy

The relationship between social comparison and self-efficacy is moderated by perceived product relevance. High self-efficacy consumers notice the USC and perceive it to be relevant given their achievement-oriented motivation since they truly believe they can use the sponsored product effectively for their own goals [11]. Low self-efficacy consumers may not perceive the product to be relevant unless the content also includes DSC and other efficacy-enhancing cues (e.g. tutorials and testimonials). Riet et al. showed this in an experiment where low self-efficacy participants were exposed to USC with efficacy enhancing content (e.g. influencer saying, "Anyone can do this!") with similar purchase intentions as high self-efficacy participants [18].

Further, self-efficacy moderates the relationship between social comparison and attitude towards the influencer. Consumers with high self-efficacy are likely to trust influencers who present challenging (USC) content as they admire the influencer's expertise [1]. Consumers with low self-efficacy are likely to trust influencers who present relatable (DSC) content because they view the influencer as an authentic and trustworthy individual [4]. This trust affects the attitude towards the sponsored content and purchasing intention.

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5. The discussion and suggestions

5.1. Overall conclusions

This literature review encompasses throughout the role of social comparison, self-esteem and self-efficacy in influencer marketing. Key empirical conclusions included: (1) Social comparison tendencies (USC vs. DSC) interact with self-esteem to shape consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. USC benefits high self-esteem consumers but harms low self-esteem ones and vice-versa for DSC. (2) Self-efficacy moderates the impact of social comparison; high self-efficacy consumers respond positively to USC (particularly when accompanied by efficacy-enhancing cues) while benefiting from DSC, Low self-efficacy consumers are more likely to utilize the social comparison strategy. (3) Although being more emotionally engaged and less susceptible to market-related hobbies, consumers are more likely to engage with the influencer's sponsored content if they believe that the sponsored content aligns with their self-concept.

5.2. Practical suggestions

For brands and influencers, the findings offer actionable recommendations:

Audience Segmentation: Understand self-esteem and self-efficacy profiles of your target audiences through market research so you can build USC content for high-self-esteem/self-efficacy audiences (influencers showcasing premium products getting them closer to goals) and DSC content for low-self-esteem/self-efficacy audiences (influencers sharing relatable failings showing products overcoming challenges).

Content Design: Pack USC content (e.g. tutorials, before and after results, and encouraging language) with efficacy-enhancing cues low self-efficacy consumers can benefit from. With DSC content make sure no individual or behavior is included that may make it difficult to believe products can deliver.

Influencer Selection: Audiences often identify with influencers whose self-presentation align with their self-concept. Thus, low-self-esteem audiences are more likely to respond to "micro-influencers"—those who post relatable content as well as having smaller followings—than "macro-influencers" who live aspirational lifestyles, or vice versa for high self-esteem audiences.

Transparency: Educate influencers on the importance of being transparent about sponsored content, which significantly enhances the credibility of the influencer. Low self-esteem consumers may distrust influencers who fail to disclose paid partnerships, so honesties should be clear about sponsored content and portray products naturally within their posts.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the influence of social comparison dynamics on consumer responses to influencer marketing, specifically self-esteem and self-efficacy. The review demonstrates that the effectiveness of influencer marketing is not one-size-fits-all but is contingent on the interplay between content characteristics (type of comparison) and individual differences (self-esteem/self-efficacy). By appreciating these nuances, brands and influencers can design campaigns that cater to specific audience segments for more potent communication.

The implications of this research extend beyond marketing as a whole underscoring how crucial consumer psychology is in digital advertising and encouraging ethical advertising that prioritizes the welfare of the targeted audience. For scholars, the review lays the groundwork for future studies and

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identifies significant gaps that must be addressed to progress our understanding of social comparison in the digital landscape. Ultimately, this research furthers the understanding of influencer marketing, contributing to a growing corpus of literature that fuses theory and practice for mutually advantageous outcomes for brands, target audiences, and consumers themselves.

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