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Abstract: Experiencing benign envy is common in the digital age, where people are exposed to diverse information shared on social media. This study uses social comparison theory and reveals the role of benign envy in influencers inducing audiences' purchase intentions (PI) of endorsed products. Furthermore, the study uses a qualitative design to find that social media influencers who are perceived by the audience as being similar to themselves are more likely to increase their PI, especially those with low self-esteem. Benign envy mediates the similarity between audiences and influencers and their PI. Finally, implications for marketers or researchers are provided regarding how social comparison theory works for influencer marketing.

Keywords: benign envy; social media influencers; SMIs; purchase intentions; PI; influencer marketing.

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1   Introduction

People have become more connected due to the internet, and the rise of social media has transformed how they communicate. We interact with our friends and co-workers through social media and even form para-social relationships with traditional celebrities and online micro-celebrities [also called social media influencers (SMIs)] on social media. In recent years, influencer marketing has become a cost-effective and successful marketing strategy for several reasons. First, it ensures a broad reach to highly engaged consumers (Jaitly and Gautam, 2021). Second, audiences perceive celebrities as their online friends and form loyalty (Stern et al., 2007). This para-social relationship with SMIs positively impacts their followers: audiences are likely to have positive attitudes toward the endorsed products and strong purchase intentions (PI) (Kim and Kim, 2021). Third, influencers are seen as more trustworthy, and consumers are inclined to buy the product that the influencer recommends rather than being influenced by traditional commercials (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

Although some studies on influencer marketing focus on the credibility of the source (Djafarova and Matson, 2021), the trustworthiness of influencers (Duh and Thabethe, 2021) and emotional attachment to influencers (Ladhari et al., 2020), the staged photos of online celebrities, their attractive appearance, a fancy lifestyle and their influence on followers' product choices makes us question whether the audience will experience envy when they consciously or unconsciously compare themselves to celebrities or SMIs.

Social media provides us with more opportunities to get a closer look at others and compare ourselves with them. Since SMIs are usually fashionable, attractive and famous, with thousands or even millions of followers, their audiences may make upward comparisons and feel envious.

In recent years, there has been much discussion about envy on social media sites (e.g., Lemay et al., 2019; Nisar et al., 2019; Wenninger et al., 2021). Envy triggered by social networking sites (SNSs) might lead a person to desire others' holiday experiences (Liu et al., 2019). According to research, Instagram celebrities are more trustworthy, inspire more envy, and interact more with followers than traditional celebrities (Jin et al., 2019). When audiences experience higher envy, they have increased intentions to purchase what the Insta-celebrity was wearing (Jin and Ryu, 2020).

Although the relationship between benign envy and an audience's PI was stated (Jin and Ryu, 2020; Jin and Muqaddam, 2021), very little is known about how benign envy is

formed in some circumstances and not in others. In this regard, the following antecedents for the activation of benign envy were not discussed: the comparison target's superiority, the degree of similarity between the focal individual and the comparison target, and the focal individual's self-esteem (SE) (Collins, 1996; Corcoran et al., 2011; Gibbons and Buunk, 1999; Wood, 1989).

Thus, the current study seeks to fill gaps in the research by using social comparison theory to investigate the psychological process that underpins how the SMI's endorsement affects consumers' PI regarding endorsed goods.

2 Theoretical background and research hypotheses

2.1 Benign envy

As people's use of SNSs increases, Vogel et al. (2014) stated that most social comparison messages they receive might be positive and attributed to upward comparison. Indeed, an SNS provides an ideal platform for a detailed display of daily lives. Users can selectively post content on their social media profiles, upload pictures and show 'perfect' images of themselves (Rosenberg and Egbert, 2011). In comparison, real-life interactions do not allow for such flexibility in displaying themselves (Ellison et al., 2006). According to social comparison theory, exposure to information on social media stimulates self-evaluation by comparing oneself to others (Festinger, 1954).

Aspirational consumption could be ignited by benign envy, characterised by admiration for the target of the upward comparison, is a positive emotion similar to 'admiration' and may motivate the audience to purchase the same products used by the referent other (Belk, 2011). Different from malicious envy, which emanates from a longing for the comparison target to not have an advantage, benign envy is related to a craving to possess what others have, reflecting the behavioural inclination of self-improvement, for instance, in ways of aspirational consumption or working hard to follow in others' steps (Van de Ven et al., 2009). For example, Van de Ven et al. (2011) found that people who experience benign envy like to spend more money on desired products possessed by the envied friend.

Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H1 Benign envy toward an SMI leads to PI toward celebrity-endorsed goods.

2.2 Similarity with SMIs

The status or images displayed by an SMI may elicit their followers to engage in social comparisons because they may feel associated with influencers partly through higher similarity levels (Glucksman, 2017). For the audience, the similarity with others is related to the level of fondness and attractiveness bestowed on them (Michinov and Michinov, 2011), ultimately affecting the PI. There are some studies related to similarities and PI. For example, similarity with online friends could increase PI for movie tickets (Fu et al., 2018). Readers' similarities with reviewers are positively related to attitudes toward hotels and the PI (Chan et al., 2017; Shin et al., 2017).

SMIs could be the subject of envy by some audiences, partly because of their attractiveness, popularity and likeness. The audience's upward social comparison could induce aspirational consumption to mimic them and covet or purchase the envied person's possessions (Choi and Rifon, 2012). In this regard, envy is more common toward individuals the audience recognises, who share similar characteristics to them (Miceli and Castelfranchi, 2007). There is a positive relationship between envy of the media figure and motivation to mimic them (Nabi and Keblusek, 2014). When we think the public figure or the influencer is similar to us and is attractive, we may consider their possessions achievable. Such thoughts result in envy and longing for what the influencer owns. However, if the public figure's status is too high and far removed from our lives, we may deem their achievements unattainable and will not have much motivation to follow them (Lockwood and Kunda, 1997). According to Jin et al. (2019), consumers feel more envious of SMIs than consumers exposed to celebrities' commercials.

Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H2   The audience's similarity to the SMI leads to benign envy toward the SMI.

2.3   *Attractiveness of SMIs*

Source attractiveness models were often studied to explain how influencer marketing works (e.g. Jin et al., 2019; Kapitan and Silvera, 2016; Lim et al., 2017). Using physically attractive celebrities can be a predictor of advertising effectiveness (Till and Busler, 2000) partly because attractiveness makes liking possible (Cialdini, 2009), and attractive adults are treated more favourably than those who are not (Langlois et al., 2000). In our study, we wanted to understand the relationship between attractiveness and PI from the perspective of social comparison theory.

As previously stated, a crucial component of upward social comparison is the superiority of the comparison target (Wood, 1989). As a result, the attractiveness of SMIs is more likely to elicit upward social comparison and benign envy. The SMI expresses their attractiveness on social media by displaying their lives through positive self-presentation (Hong et al., 2012). This form of expressing their social attractiveness and popularity can also be seen as their resource. The more resources humans have, the greater their competitiveness. An SMI's degree of attractiveness reflects the perceived strength of their superiority. Consequently, if the audience deems an SMI more attractive than them, they may feel outranked or subordinated, which is called envy (Tandoc et al., 2015).

Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H3   An SMI's perceived attractiveness leads to benign envy toward them.

2.4   *Audiences' low-esteem*

Upward social comparison is more likely to impact persons with low SE who need to prove their social worth by referring to others (Crocker and Park, 2004). SE is a general assessment of one's self-concept or sense of self-acceptance or self-worth (Rosenberg, 1965). Individuals with low SE tend to compare themselves to others to identify their standing in the social order and make an upward social comparison (Buunk and Gibbons, 2007). They are more willing to pay for luxury products to show their high status

(Sivanathan and Pettit, 2010). People with high SE are less likely to compare themselves to others or those inferior to them (Wills, 1981). There are a few hypothetical reasons to explain this: first, these people are suspicious of themselves and gain self-awareness and appraisal by comparing themselves to others (Gibbons and Buunk, 1999). Second, because persons with low SE have a negative self-concept, they might improve their self-evaluation by maintaining relationships and seeking validation through social comparisons (Crocker and Park, 2004). People with low SE tend not to make downward comparisons. Third, they often have more need for maintaining and improving SE; thus, they are motivated to satisfy this need through social comparison (Crocker and Canevello, 2012). They also resort to displaying material goods as a strategy for boosting their self-worth (Banister and Hogg, 2004), and their low SE is related to conspicuous consumption (Souiden and M'saad, 2011; Truong and McColl, 2011).

Thus, we proposed the following hypotheses:

H4   The audience's SE moderates the impact of the SMI's attractiveness on benign envy.

H5   The audience's SE moderates the impact of their similarity to SMIs on benign envy.

The theoretical model is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1   Theoretical model
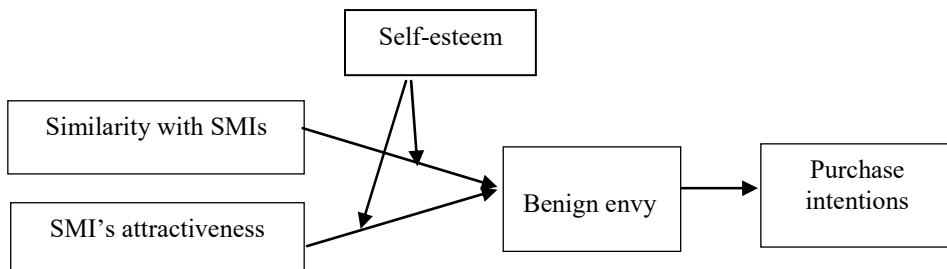
3   Method

Data collection was conducted in August 2021. In total, 324 participants passed the screening question and were recruited through the Credamo platform, which provides online surveys and large-scale data collection services. Twelve responses were filtered out considering the inter-item standard deviation and as a result, we had 312 valid responses.

All participants were paid and recruited from the platform, Credamo, which has over two million registered participants. The research was conducted in China, where, in 2016, there were already over one million SMIs (Sohu, 2016), and in 2019, the SMI market size was over 250 billion yuan (Huaon, 2020). Furthermore, with the popularity of TikTok and other live streaming platforms, there were over 504 million Chinese users on live streaming platforms and 520 million users on short-video platforms in 2019, and these numbers continue to grow.

Table 1   Descriptive statistics of respondents

Variable	Items	N	Variable	Items	N
Gender	Male	129	Education	High school and below	1
	Female	183		College	14
Age	16–25	244		University	279
	26–35	63		Masters and above	18
	36–45	5	Household income per month	Below 6,000 (yuan)	116
Occupation	Student	218		6,001–10,000	103
	Government official	30		10,001–15,000	60
	company staff	49		15,001–20,000	22
	Others	15		Over 20,000	11

3.1 Procedure

We used the screening question to determine whether they followed an SMI who had previously promoted products. Only respondents answering in the affirmative passed the screening.

After screening and before completing the survey, they needed to choose their favourite SMI who had endorsed a product. In the survey, participants were advised that SMIs were defined as influencers who have been popular on social media with over 50,000 followers. Unlike traditional celebrities, SMIs have become famous through online social media platforms. Respondents were asked to imagine a scenario where they wanted to buy a pair of shoes with a sufficient budget and then saw their favourite SMI recommending a pair of shoes. The participants needed to answer questions regarding their PI for the SMI-endorsed product, their SE, benign envy toward the SMI, similarity with SMI and the SMI's attractiveness.

3.2 Measures

For SMI's attractiveness, the measurement scales were adopted from Ohanian (1990). For SE, the measurement scales were adopted from Rosenberg (2015), with the higher scores representing lower levels of SE. The measurement scales for benign envy were adopted from Lange and Crusius (2015). Additionally, the measurement scales for similarity with SMIs were adopted from Tepper et al. (2011). PI were measured based on Park and Lin's (2020) work. The Cronbach α has been tested in the previous literature. We used a five-point Likert scale in the study, where a score of '1' means totally disagree and '5' means totally agree.

4 Results

4.1 Reliability and validity

Exploratory factor analysis was used to confirm the construct validity for each variable, followed by the average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR)

calculations to determine the measurement model's convergent validity. All AVE values are above 0.5, and CR values are above 0.7. The Cronbach's alphas are above 0.7, which means the scales are reliable. Therefore, the scale had good validity and reliability.

Table 2 Results of convergent validity and reliability

Latent constructs	Cronbach's alpha	AVE	Composite reliability
Attractiveness	0.799	0.574	0.801
Similarity with SMIs	0.771	0.684	0.806
Self-esteem	0.869	0.692	0.870
Benign envy	0.768	0.653	0.774
PI	0.866	0.691	0.870

As shown in Table 3, the correlation coefficients of the dimensions were all smaller than the square root of the AVE, implying that each dimension had good discriminant validity in this study.

Table 3 Results of discriminant validity

	Attractiveness	Similarity	Self-esteem	Benign envy	PI
Attractiveness	0.758				
Similarity	0.603	0.794			
Self-esteem	0.127	0.263	0.832		
Benign envy	0.581	0.676	0.195	0.678	
PI	0.569	0.727	0.305	0.664	0.829

4.2 Assessment of the measurement model

Firstly, the common method variance (CMV) was analysed before moving with the measurement model. All measurement items were put in SPSS as one factor and the model did not demonstrate a good fit (x^2 = 799.234, p= 0.000; x^2/DF: 8.880; GFI: 0.732; AGFI: 0.643; NFI: 0.686; IFI: 0.712; TLI: 0.661; CFI: 0.710; RMSEA (90% CI): 0.149 ~ 0.169). It showed that all measurements did not belong to one factor; therefore, the data was free from CMV.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was applied to measure the validity and reliability. Overall, the model then demonstrated a satisfactory fit (x^2 = 433.254, p= 0.000; x^2/DF: 2.233; GFI: 0.891; AGFI: 0.857; NFI: 0.931; IFI: 0.961; TLI: 0.953; CFI: 0.960; RMSEA (90% CI): 0.054 ~ 0.070), suggesting the uni-dimensionality, convergent validity and discriminant validity of the measures.

Table 4 Model fit metrics

	χ^2	df	p	χ^2/df	GFI	RMSEA	RMR	CFI	NFI
Value	157.759	55	0.000	2.868	0.924	0.078	0.046	0.948	0.923
	NNFI	TLI	AGFI	IFI	PGFI	PNFI	SRMR	RMSEA 90% CI	
Value	0.926	0.926	0.875	0.949	0.559	0.651	0.052	0.063~0.092	

Default model: χ^2(78) = 2,054.295, p = 1.000

4.3   Hypothesis testing

The path coefficient and hypotheses were tested using SPSS. The findings of each standardised route coefficient in the model are shown in Table 5.

Table 5   Regression coefficient summary table

X	→	Y	Unstandardised regression coefficient	SE	z (CR)	p	Standardised regression coefficient
Similarity	→	Benign envy	0.441	0.043	10.232	0.000	0.511
Attractiveness	→	Benign envy	0.257	0.047	5.461	0.000	0.273
Benign envy	→	PI	0.819	0.052	15.691	0.000	0.664

Table 5 shows that when similarity affects benign envy, the standardised path coefficient value is 0.511 > 0. This path shows significance at the level of 0.01 (z = 10.232, p = 0.000 < 0.01), which indicates that similarity will have a significant positive effect on benign envy, supporting H2. The audience's similarity to the SMI leads to benign envy toward the SMI.

When attractiveness affects benign envy, the standardised path coefficient value is 0.273 > 0. This path shows significance at the level of 0.01 (z = 5.461, p = 0.000 < 0.01), which shows that attractiveness will have a significant positive effect on benign envy, supporting H3. An SMI's perceived attractiveness leads to benign envy toward them.

When benign envy affects PI, the standardised path coefficient value is 0.664 > 0. This path exhibits a significant level of 0.01 (z = 15.691, p = 0.000 < 0.01), which shows that benign envy will have a significant positive effect on PI, confirming H1. Benign envy toward an SMI leads to purchase intentions toward celebrity-endorsed goods.

Figure 2   Path coefficients of the hypothesised model (see online version for colours)
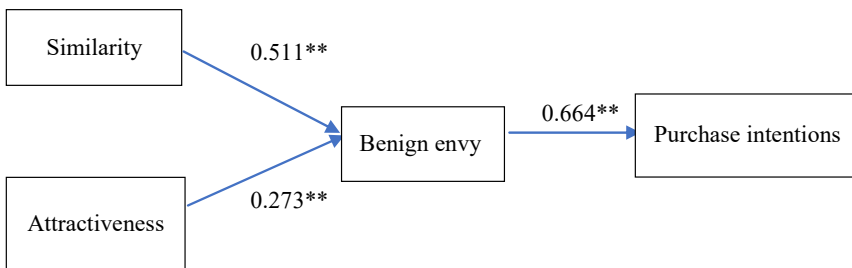
Note: **p < 0.01.

4.4   Moderating effect of SE

We test the moderating effect of SE by first centralising all variables, calculating the interaction terms and analysing the moderating effect through hierarchical multiple regression. We checked the significance of the interaction term in Model 3 and examined the moderating effect. It can be seen from Table 6 that the interaction of similarity and SE is significant (t = 2.261, p = 0.024 < 0.05). Therefore, when similarity affects benign envy when the adjustment variable (SE) is at various levels, the magnitude of the impact

differs. The simple slope diagram shows the difference in the influence of attractiveness on benign envy when SE is at different levels.

Table 6 Analysis result of the moderating effect in the relationship between similarity and benign envy

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	3.621** (132.455)	3.621** (132.282)	3.608** (129.600)
Similarity	0.582** (16.136)	0.578** (15.435)	0.607** (15.415)
Self-esteem		0.013 (0.438)	–0.007 (–0.247)
Similarity * self-esteem			0.068* (2.261)
R^2	0.456	0.457	0.466
Adjusted R^2	0.455	0.453	0.460
F value	F (1,310) = 260.374, p =0.000	F (2,309) = 129.943, p = 0.000	F (3,308) = 89.487, p = 0.000
ΔR^2	0.456	0.000	0.009
ΔF value	F (1,310) = 260.374, p = 0.000	F (1,309) = 0.191, p = 0.662	F (1,308) = 5.113, p = 0.024

Notes: Dependent variable: benign envy.
$*p < 0.05$ and $**p < 0.01$.

Figure 3 Relationship between similarity and benign envy by the level of SE (see online version for colours)
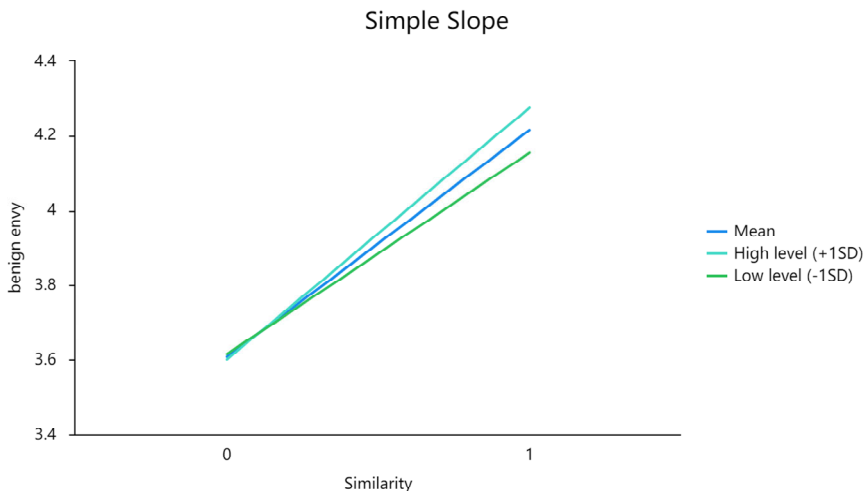
The simple slope shown in Figure 3 revealed a positive relationship between the SMI's similarity with the audience and related benign envy and low self-esteem increases this positive correlation.

However, the moderation effect of SE does not affect the relationship between attractiveness and benign envy (shown in Table 7). Using hierarchical multiple regression, the interaction term of attractiveness and SE does not show significance ($t = 1.694$, $p = 0.091 > 0.05$). When attractiveness affects benign envy and the

moderating variable (SE) is at different levels, the magnitude of the impact remains the same. The result does not support H4 but supports H5.

Table 7   Analysis result of the moderating effect in the relationship between attractiveness and benign envy

	Model 1	*Model 2*	*Model 3*
Constant	3.621** (119.976)	3.621** (121.153)	3.615** (120.452)
Attractiveness	0.548** (12.568)	0.533** (12.249)	0.553** (12.316)
Self-esteem		0.081** (2.667)	0.062 (1.898)
Attractiveness * self-esteem			0.069 (1.694)
R^2	0.338	0.352	0.358
Adj. R^2	0.335	0.348	0.352
F	F (1,310) = 157.966, p = 0.000	F (2,309) = 84.097, p = 0.000	F (3,308) = 57.360, p = 0.000
ΔR^2	0.338	0.015	0.006
ΔF	F (1,310) = 157.966, p = 0.000	F (1,309) = 7.112, p = 0.008	F (1,308) = 2.869, p = 0.091

Notes: Dependent variable: benign envy.
        *p < 0.05 and **p < 0.01.

5   Discussion

The results revealed the positive impacts of SMIs' attractiveness and similarity with the audience on purchase intentions toward celebrity-endorsed products, while benign envy acted as a mediator in these relationships. The audience's emotional responses toward the endorsement by SMI has always been discussed in the 'stimulus-organism-response' model, and in this study, the stimulus' impact on the PI is affected by the SMI's characteristics, which are the SMI's attractiveness and similarity, and the mediation factor is the audience's benign envy toward the SMI. Envy used to be considered a harmful emotion, for instance, trying to diminish others' qualities and possessions. In this article, we argued that benign envy is positive, and this desire to 'level up' could be aspirational, motivating people to 'keep up with the Joneses' and enhance their image by purchasing the same product promoted by their favourite SMI, who, though similar to the superior celebrity, shares more similarities with the audience. The boundary between the SMI and the audience is lower than the boundaring between the traditional celebrity and the audience, opening the possibility for benign envy and SMIs becoming models for emulation. Therefore, benign envy results in the audience coveting what the SMI endorses and having purchase intentions.

The results of this study contradict the statement that using attractive models in advertising negatively impacts the evaluation of the model and advertising effectiveness when the audience compares themselves to these models (Bower, 2001). In Bower's (2011) study, the negative effect results from the audience's jealousy, which is related to some negative emotions, including depression, sadness, anxiety and anger. However, in our study, benign envy is used to understand the positive relationship between the SMI's attractiveness and purchase intentions toward the endorsed products. The underlying

reason for the differences between our result and Bower's might be that our study focuses on SMIs, whom the audience follows and with whom they share some similarities, rather than the model selected by the subjects of the experiment bearing no or little similarities with the audience. One of the novelties of this study is that it showed that the attractiveness of the SMI can be positively related to the audience's purchase intentions of the SMI-endorsed product when the audience feels benign envy, which is related to more positive emotions and behaviours, including admiration toward the comparison target and an aspiration or motivation to 'level up' (Belk, 2011).

This study aimed to consider the impact of SMI endorsement on consumers' PI of endorsed goods from a social comparison perspective. It demonstrates that benign envy plays a critical role in affecting the effectiveness of influencer marketing. Furthermore, this study found that an audience's similarity with SMIs and SMI's perceived attractiveness could induce the audience's benign envy. When the SMI is considered someone similar to themselves, an audience with low SE is more inclined to have benign envy, consistent with previous research stating that similarity is an essential antecedent for upward social comparison.

People with low self-teem are more likely to have benign envy (Liu et al., 2019). The result that similarity with the influencers leads to PI could be due to several reasons. First, if the influencer has an achievement perceived as too high, the audience may be discouraged to try their best to achieve the same achievement and thus would not have aspirational consumption. Second, the inter-group comparison, rather than comparison with out-group members, can impact self-evaluation (Brewer and Weber, 1994). Inter-group comparison may cause them to feel inferior when they compare themselves with better-looking influencers who have achieved much success, knowledge or wealth, and then make the compensatory status consumption.

In our study, low self-esteem has no impact on the relationship between the SMI's attractiveness and benign envy. The underlying reason for this finding could be that the audience with low self-esteem may lower their self-evaluation when they compare themselves to the attractive SMIs. These negative feelings, which are based on their egos or status being threatened or the risk of them looking bad in front of others, may evoke malicious envy rather than benign envy. Therefore, self-esteem has no impact on the positive correlation between SMIs' attractiveness and benign envy. Scholars did not study the moderation effect of self-esteem in the relationship between attractiveness and benign envy but focused on the relationship between self-esteem and envy (e.g. Duarte, 2011; Smallet et al., 2016). This study deepens the understanding of how self-esteem moderated the relationship between the SMI's characteristics and the audience's benign envy.

This result aligns with social comparison theory and proves a positive correlation between benign envy and PI of SMI-endorsed goods (Belk, 2011). Members of the audience compare themselves to the target and are motivated toward self-improvement and obtain the same achievements or status as the targets. Aspirational consumption is one of the ways to signal status.

6   Theoretical implications

The current research is one of the first attempts to use social comparison theory to explain the effects of influencer marketing by providing some evidence. Only a few studies have discussed benign envy toward influencers (e.g., Lee and Eastin, 2020) partly because benign envy is commonly due to upward comparison with friends or peers (e.g., Liu et al., 2019). The study showed that social comparison theory could be applied to influencer marketing because social media provides a convenient way for people to compare themselves to others and get inspired or influenced. The previous study on celebrity focuses on followers' admiration (Meng et al., 2021) or celebrity worship (Singh and Banerjee, 2019). Unlike traditional celebrities, SMIs are micro-celebrities, grass-rooted and more interactive. Thus, their similarity with the audience makes upward social comparison and benign envy possible. Therefore, applying social comparison theory is suitable for studying influencer marketing and electronic word-of-mouth communication on social media.

For social media marketing, the current study highlights that influencer marketing could be an effective tool if the comparison with influencers induces the audience's benign envy.

Even though benign envy has positive consequences, few researchers have paid attention to the user's emotional responses to the SMI's posts, including the emotion of envy. This study shows that the influence of SMIs on the audience's purchase intentions can be partly explained by benign envy. Moreover, our research also highlights the moderating role of self-esteem on the relationship between SMIs' characteristics and audiences' purchase intentions. These findings offer us a better understanding of when and how the effects of benign envy and purchase intentions occur.

The study also shows that if the audience has low SE, the marketing effect will be better when influencer marketing is used on them. This result confirms previous findings that people with low SE are more likely to make upward social comparisons and purchase decisions to prove their worth or status (Liu et al., 2019).

7   Practical implications

This study provides social media marketers with valuable insights. For example, marketing managers could choose attractive influencers to promote products. The status or the luxury of the products could evoke the benign envy of the audience. Also, social media celebrities themselves can evoke envious feelings, resulting in their followers buying the endorsed products they covet.

Their similarity with the audience is essential for the persuasiveness of the endorsement. Therefore, marketers could select the right endorsers who match the product image and appeal to the influencer's similar tastes, values or lifestyles.

Moreover, the audience's characteristics also influence the effectiveness of influencer marketing. In this regard, marketers or influencers could target audiences with low SE by designing or promoting products so that the audience could feel that having the product could elevate their self-perception, show themselves as someone with higher social status or someone who has good tastes, just like their favourite influencers. Purchasing a product not only meets the need for practical use but sometimes meets the need for improved self-worth. Influencers may make audiences feel that they could purchase the

same products used by influencers and have a happy and satisfying life similar to the influencer. Accordingly, audiences may purchase products impulsively to eliminate negative feelings when they make upward comparisons with influencers.

Because of the perceived attractiveness of the model and their similarity with the audience, the SMI can be not only the upward comparison target but also the audience's ideal image. Therefore, purchasing SMI-endorsed products is a way for audiences to follow the trends, improve themselves and get closer to their ideal images. SMI-promoted clothes, accessories, cars and other conspicuous products are more likely to be effective than promoting daily necessities, such as food and batteries, because conspicuous products are easy for purchasers to show their ideal image, lifestyle and status. For the marketers who want to choose the SMI, the right SMIs for promoting the product are the ones with an attractive personality, appearance, lifestyle, also sharing similarities with the product's target customers partly because these SMIs are more likely to elicit benign envy compared to SMIs with no similarity to the product's target customers, whom customers do not perceive as attractive.

8 Limitations and future research

There are some limitations in the current research. For instance, malicious envy or admiration are not examined in this study and might be incorporated to show broader emotional reactions from the audience. A questionnaire survey was used to obtain data for the article. The future study could use a larger sample or different research methods to validate the findings.

The study calls for more attention to influencer marketing. Other factors can induce benign envy when audiences are involved in upward social comparison with influencers, such as influencers' traits, the audience–influencer relationship and the audience's self-focus. These factors can be examined in future studies on influencer marketing.

The study highlights that consumers' SE affects their PI. This characteristic needs further investigation because customers with low SE constitute a large but underexplored segment. Their motivations for PI can be further studied.

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