ORIGINAL EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The bad-influencer effect: Indulgence undermines social connection

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Abstract

This research tested the "bad influencer" effect, whereby consumers are less willing to connect with people on social media who post about their indulgence (vs. self-control) with respect to the goals valued by those consumers. We present six studies that test the bad-influencer effect across multiple domains involving indulgence (vs. self-control): eating indulgent (vs. healthy) foods, spending time mindlessly (vs. mindfully), and using profane (vs. proper) language. Our findings show consumers are less willing to connect with people whose social media posts appear indulgent (vs. self-controlled) because they believe such posters will more negatively influence their own valued goals (i.e., interpersonal instrumentality expectations). We further identify two theoretically derived moderators of the bad-influencer effect: goal commitment amplifies the effect, whereas goal suppression attenuates the effect. Finally, we show that willingness to connect (WTC) has downstream consequences for consumers' receptivity to word-of-mouth (WOM) recommendations made by posters. Our research suggests that content creators and marketing managers seeking to maximize connections should avoid sharing content that appears indulgent with respect to their target audience's goals.

Keywords Bad-influencer effect · Online engagement · Indulgence · Instrumentality expectations · Word-of-mouth

Introduction

Take a moment to scroll through your social media feed and you'll find innumerable examples of content creators sharing their everyday indulgences (e.g., enjoying a decadent piece of chocolate cake) and episodes of self-control (e.g., having a salad for dinner) alongside brand and product recommendations (eMarketer, 2021). On Instagram, nearly 2.1 million posts use the hashtags #indulge and #indulgence, combined, and over 2.5 million use the hashtags #selfcontrol and #willpower (as of writing). In these virtual spaces, consumers choose with whom to connect (e.g., "follow" on Instagram, "friend" on Facebook),

giving content creators a platform to promote branded content via word-of-mouth (WOM) recommendations. In light of the rising prevalence of this influencer-marketing paradigm (McKinsey, 2023), understanding how and why sharing moments of indulgence or self-control on social media affects consumers' willingness to connect (WTC) is critical for both the content creators who aim to maximize their social media connections (and hence their influence) and the marketing managers who rely on these creators ("influencers") to promote their products and brands to the largest possible audience.

Several streams of research have examined the role of an online content creator's characteristics in driving online engagement metrics such as likes (Chung et al., 2023), comments, shares (Tang et al., 2022), follow intentions (Barta et al., 2023), retweets, WOM receptivity (Valsesia & Diehl, 2022), and purchase intentions (Ao et al., 2023). A content creator's perceived authenticity (Chung et al., 2023; Tang et al., 2022; Valsesia & Diehl, 2022), credibility (Ao et al., 2023), warmth (Chung et al., 2023; Tang et al., 2022), humorousness (Barta et al., 2023), and morality (Pradhan et al., 2023), as well as consumers' admiration (Kim et al., 2022) and envy (Lee & Eastin, 2020) of the content creator, all boost consumers' online engagement with that person and the content they've shared. Tang et al., (2022), for example,

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find that posts featuring "#indulgent" food (e.g., chocolate cake) versus "#healthy" food (e.g., salad) receive more likes, comments, and shares because the person posting is seen as more authentic, and therefore warmer. This finding suggests that, in online social media contexts, the nature and content of a post (self-control vs. indulgence) influence observers' perceptions of the person posting as well as observers' engagement with the *post* itself (e.g., likes, comments, shares). But what about observers' engagement and WTC with the content creator (e.g., following, friending, subscribing)?

We note that *connecting* with a target on social media (rather than merely interacting with the content of a single post) dictates continued exposure to that person's content, and thus may depend on factors other than perceived authenticity and warmth. Indeed, as users become aware that who they follow on social media affects the content that will be algorithmically promoted to them on the platform (Bucher, 2017), they begin to consider how to align the content they will see with their own goals and preferences (Forbes, 2024; Loic, 2023). Decisions to connect with others on social media may therefore be based on the extent to which the connection would serve a consumer's goals. We propose that posts that appear indulgent (vs. self-controlled) from the perspective of the observing consumer's active goals could have a negative effect on the consumer's willingness to connect with the person posting.

Specifically, we advance that interpersonal instrumentality expectations—a mechanism never before tested in the realm of online engagement—play a predominant role in driving connection with content creators on social media. Interpersonal instrumentality refers to the degree to which another person is deemed instrumental (helpful) rather than impedimental (harmful) to one's goals. Prior research shows that interpersonal instrumentality increases social connection in close relationships (i.e., with friends and family) and with unknown peers who make explicit promises of assistance (e.g., a student who helps other students; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Slotter & Gardner, 2011). In these cases, judgments of interpersonal instrumentality stem from the target's history of support or explicit promises of assistance.

By contrast, in the context of forming new relationships with a target, there is no shared history and no prior experiences to inform an observer about the instrumentality of the target. We theorize that in such cases, the target's display of a behavior that appears indulgent or self-controlled from the perspective of the observer's own goals shapes observers' instrumentality *expectations* about them. That is, in the context of forming new relationships with a target posting on social media, interpersonal instrumentality *expectations* arise from the poster's *behavior with respect to the goals of the observer*. We propose that online strangers who are indulging (vs. exercising self-control) with respect to the

goals of an observer elicit more negative expectations of interpersonal instrumentality. In turn, these negative interpersonal instrumentality expectations reduce consumers' WTC, and actual connection, with indulgent (vs. self-controlled) posters. We dub this pattern of response the "bad influencer" effect.

Additionally, we examine an important downstream consequence of the bad-influencer effect: consumers' receptiveness to WOM recommendations from indulgent (vs. self-controlled) posters as a function of their willingness to connect with such posters. People are more likely to follow the advice of those to whom they feel close (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Delbaere et al., 2021; Shan et al., 2020). Forming even an imaginary relationship with online influencers is known to boost a consumer's receptivity to their brand and product recommendations (Ki et al., 2020; Shan et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Yuan & Lou, 2020). We therefore predict that as WTC with a target decreases, consumers will become less receptive to WOM recommendations from that target.

Our findings contribute to the rich literature about interpersonal influences on goals, and to the theory and practice of influencer marketing in several ways. First, prior research on interpersonal instrumentality has focused on close friends and family (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2018) whose instrumentality is known, or unknown peers whose instrumentality is made explicit through verbal declarations (Slotter & Gardner, 2011) or joint goal-pursuit (Huang et al., 2015). We show that *expectations* about a stranger's instrumentality can stem from their behavior on social media, without their having provided help to, promised assistance to, or collaborated with the observer. Second, our work is part of an emerging literature that examines the factors affecting social connection with a content creator or poster (i.e., intention or motivation to follow or avoid; Barbe et al., 2020; Barta et al., 2023; Morton, 2020; Pradhan et al., 2023; Valsesia & Diehl, 2022). Social connection is critical in online spaces because the more connections a content creator garners, the more desirable a partner they are for marketing managers seeking to reach consumers. Firms currently spend roughly $5.0 billion annually in the US (over $30 billion globally) on paying digital content creators to promote products and brands (Enberg, 2022; PQ Media, 2023). Our work offers critical insights for content creators and marketing managers.

Theoretical development

The role of interpersonal instrumentality in social connection

People prefer to be around close friends or family members whom they know to be instrumental to their own goals—that

is, those who advance or facilitate their goal progress, or are useful, motivating, or helpful in satisfying their active goals—compared to those who are non-instrumental (Fitzsimons, 2006; Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2011; Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2010). In one study, Fitzsimons and Shah (2008) asked participants (college students) to write the names of friends who were instrumental to their achievement goals and friends who were not instrumental but with whom they still had a positive relationship. Subsequently, participants primed with an achievement goal rated their instrumental (vs. non-instrumental) friend as closer and more important and demonstrated greater implicit motivation to approach this friend. However, for participants not primed with the goal, no difference in closeness, importance, or approach motivation between instrumental and non-instrumental friends emerged.

Relatedly, people also prefer others who make explicit promises to help them with their goals or who pursue the goal jointly with them (Huang et al., 2015; Prestwich et al., 2005; Slotter & Gardner, 2011). For example, a study by Slotter and Gardner (2011) shows that students wanted to spend more time with an unknown schoolmate who explicitly described themselves as instrumental (i.e., "I like to study with friends") compared to one who described themselves as self-controlled with respect to academic goals, but not as specifically instrumental to the academic goals of the student (i.e., "I like to study alone"). Huang et al. (2015) show that consumers tend to view others who are jointly pursuing the same goal as them as "friends," particularly in the early stages of goal pursuit when that other person could be instrumental (e.g., by being supportive and alleviating uncertainties). For example, one woman in the initial stages of the Weight Watchers program said about the other participants, "I feel like they're my friends because they're there when I need them… we kinda dust each other off" (pp. 1256). Taken together, these findings suggest that a target's history of support (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Huang et al., 2015) or explicit references to assistance or collaboration (Prestwich et al., 2005; Slotter & Gardner, 2011) increase the perceived instrumentality of, and interpersonal closeness with, that target.

Two key assumptions underlie this prior research. The first one is that "evaluations of others will depend on active goals *only when the relationship is sufficiently interdependent* (so that the self's outcomes depend on the other in some fashion) *and sufficiently well developed* (so that the self possesses reliable information about how the other will behave)" (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008, p. 321, emphasis ours). Examples of such close connections include friends and family members, work colleagues, teachers, employees, and sports rivals (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008), as well as school mates (Slotter & Gardner, 2011), physicians (Schroeder & Fishbach, 2015), and joint-goal pursuit partners (Huang et al.,

2015; Prestwich et al., 2005). In contrast to this prior body of research, we examine interpersonal instrumentality in the context of complete strangers on social media. In an increasingly digital age, our work therefore aims to provide insights into whether, when, and why strangers on social media elicit *expectations* of interpersonal instrumentality, and what the ramifications are for both individual content creators and the marketing managers looking to partner with them to promote products and brands.

The second underlying assumption stems from a finding by Fitzsimons and Shah (2008), which suggested in close relationships, a friend or family member's self-control failure or success is unrelated to the extent to which they are perceived as instrumental. In the study, Fitzsimons and Shah (2008) asked participants to name (a) one friend who is *instrumental* to the participant's goal (but not personally successful in the goal domain), (b) one friend who is *non-instrumental* (and not successful), and (c) one friend who is *non-instrumental* (and successful). The experiment showed that participants whose goal was activated felt closest to the instrumental friend (compared to either of the other two non-instrumental friends) and felt *equally close* to the successful and unsuccessful non-instrumental friends. Thus, a friend's own goal success (vs. failure) did not boost closeness, but their instrumentality (vs. non-instrumentality) did. Indeed, the instrumentality of a close friend is established through a shared history and prior experiences (e.g., months or years of support and encouragement), such that the friend's own goal failures or success are less diagnostic of their instrumentality. However, in the context of forming new relationships, there is no shared history and no prior experiences to inform a person about the instrumentality of a target. Thus, we propose that in such cases, the target's own goal failure or success is seen as diagnostic of their instrumentality.

The bad-influencer effect

Decades of research show that people tend to make dispositional attributions for the behaviors of unknown others, such that they draw positive or negative inferences about the traits and personal characteristics of a target, based on what they observe the target doing or saying (Gilbert & Silvera, 1996; Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Kelley, 1967; Ross & Nisbett, 1991; Watson, 1982). In particular, people draw negative inferences about the personal characteristics of targets who indulge (vs. those who exercise self-control; Barker et al., 1999; Mooijman et al., 2017; Stein & Nemeroff, 1995). Thus, observing a stranger engage in indulgent (vs. self-controlled) behavior may elicit the inference that this person is chronically indulgent (vs. self-controlled) and likely to continue to be indulgent (vs. self-controlled) in the future.

Furthermore, people have lay theories about how the characteristics and behaviors of others influence their own

well-being and future outcomes (Nerurkar, 2011). Proverbs such as "One bad apple spoils the bunch" or "You are the company you keep" suggest people form expectations about the degree to which the characteristics and behaviors of others will facilitate or impede their goals (i.e., interpersonal instrumentality expectations). Thus, we propose that when consumers encounter a stranger engaging in an apparent act of indulgence (vs. self-control), they will have more negative (vs. positive) instrumentality expectations of this stranger with respect to their own goals.

Drawing from prior research on instrumentality and social connection tendencies (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Huang et al., 2015; Orehek & Forest, 2016; Slotter & Gardner, 2011), we further posit that consumers will be less willing to connect with an indulgent (vs. self-controlled) target, a pattern of response we label the "bad-influencer effect." We propose the bad-influencer effect occurs because consumers have more negative instrumentality expectations of an indulgent (vs. self-controlled) target—that is, they expect exposure to that target to have a negative impact on their own valued goals (i.e., be "a bad influence"). On social media, this avoidance tendency will manifest in terms of refraining from following or friending a poster, which is synonymous with continued exposure to the poster and their content.

Moderators of the bad-influencer effect

An important moderator emerges from this theorizing: goal activation. Because the bad-influencer effect stems from consumers' desire to achieve their valued goals, we propose that this effect occurs only when an observer's context-relevant goal is active, but not when the goal is inhibited or suppressed. For one, goals can be activated or suppressed chronically. Research shows that people vary in the degree to which they are committed to a particular goal–that is, the degree to which the goal is chronically important/valuable to them (Higgins, 2007). Furthermore, the goals that people are more committed to are more likely to be chronically active than goals that are less important (Hart & Albarracín, 2009). Thus, we expect the bad-influencer effect to amplify for consumers who are more committed to the context-relevant goal and to attenuate for those who are less committed to the goal.

For another, goals can be activated or suppressed situationally in the presence of goal-consistent objects (i.e., means). For example, walking by a table of fresh produce at the market may activate a person's goal to eat healthily. By contrast, when a person's attention is focused on another goal, such as enjoying themselves in the present moment, their long-term goal to eat healthily may become less salient (i.e., suppressed) in their minds, and thus less likely to guide their judgments and behaviors (Duckworth & Steinberg, 2015; Fujita, 2011; Gollwitzer, 1999; Higgins, 2000, 2002). Because the bad-influencer effect stems from consumers' desire to achieve

their goals, we expect the effect to attenuate when the context-relevant goal is less top-of-mind (i.e., less salient). Specifically, we propose that suppressing the context-relevant goal will moderate the bad-influencer effect, such that when the context-relevant goal is suppressed (vs. activated), the bad-influencer effect will attenuate because consumers' WTC with the target will be less guided by that goal.

Downstream consequences of the bad-influencer effect

Finally, we propose that the bad-influencer effect has downstream consequences for consumers' receptivity to word-of-mouth (WOM) recommendations from the target. Extensive research has explored whose recommendations consumers follow and why (Berger, 2014; Hughes et al., 2019; Leung et al., 2022; Moore & Lafreniere, 2020). Consumers are more receptive to WOM from their close (vs. distant) social ties (Brown & Reingen, 1987) because they believe that their close connections have better knowledge of their goals (Fitzsimons et al., 2015) and preferences (Gershoff & Johar, 2006) and hence expect close connections to make more fitting recommendations. This occurs even for imagined connections: Shan et al. (2020) find that when a social media influencer's image closely resembles a consumer's ideal self, the consumer feels a heightened sense of identification and forms an imaginary close relationship and social connection with that influencer—i.e., a parasocial relationship. Moreover, the stronger a consumer's parasocial connection with an influencer, the more receptive the consumer is to WOM from that influencer, exhibiting greater interest in, more favorable attitudes toward, and higher purchase intentions for the products and brands the influencer promotes (Shan et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Yuan & Lou, 2020). In sum, the extent to which a consumer feels connected to a source of WOM plays an important role in the consumer's receptivity to WOM from that source.

Building on these findings, we propose that consumers will be less receptive to WOM from a stranger with whom they are less (vs. more) willing to form a social connection. Indeed, consumers are likely to feel less close to a target they wish to socially avoid, compared to one they are more inclined to connect with. Thus, we propose that the bad-influencer effect will have downstream consequences for WOM receptivity: as consumers' WTC with a target decreases, so will their receptivity to WOM from that target.

Summary of hypotheses

We predict the bad-influencer effect, whereby consumers are less willing to connect with a person posting on social media about indulging (vs. exercising self-control). We posit this effect is mediated by interpersonal instrumentality
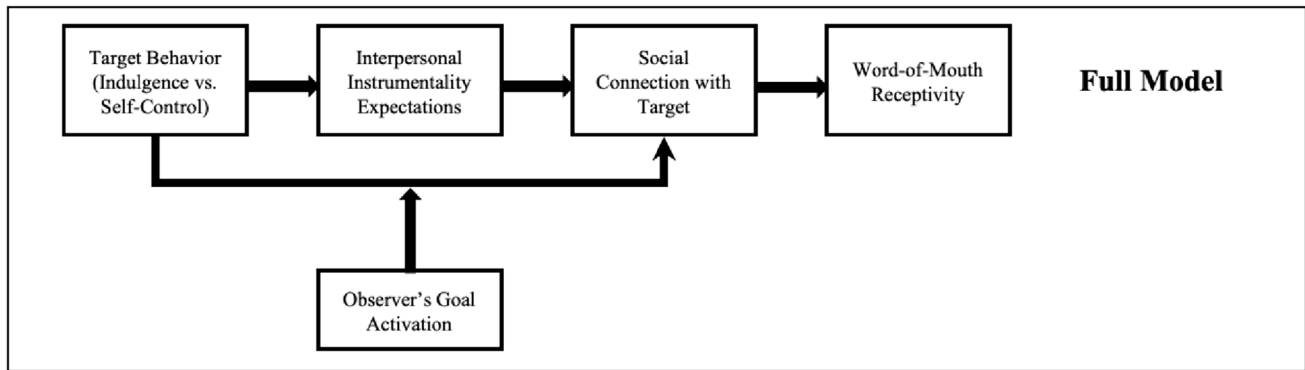
Fig. 1 Full theoretical model

expectation and moderated by the extent to which a consumer is committed to the context-relevant goal and the salience or activation of that goal. Finally, we propose that the bad-influencer effect has downstream consequences for consumers' receptivity to WOM from the target. We summarize these hypotheses below in the order in which we test them, and graphically present the full theoretical model in Fig. 1:

H1 Consumers are less willing to connect with an apparently indulgent (vs. self-controlled) target (the bad-influencer effect).

H2 Interpersonal instrumentality expectations regarding the target mediate the bad-influencer effect.

H3 The bad-influencer effect is moderated by goal activation such that:
(a) The effect is stronger for consumers who are more (vs. less) committed to the context-relevant goal, and
(b) The effect occurs when the context-relevant goal is activated and attenuates when this goal is suppressed.

H4 WTC is positively correlated to receptivity to WOM, such that lower WTC with a target decreases receptivity to WOM from the target.

Empirical overview

We tested our hypotheses about the bad-influencer effect in six studies. Because we hypothesize that the bad-influencer effect stems from consumers' desire to achieve the goals they value, we conducted most of our studies in the contexts of three pervasive goals (a) that require self-control and (b) that most participants in our subject pools chronically value (see Pretest 1 in Web Appendix A): eating healthily, spending responsibly, and living mindfully. The fact that most participants in our studies were committed to these goals ensured that they would classify the target's behavior in these domains

as either "indulgent" or "self-controlled"—a prerequisite for the bad-influencer effect. Furthermore, to test the moderating role of goal commitment, we conducted one study in the context of a goal that varies more widely in its importance to our subject pool: using proper language (exercising self-control) rather than tempting swear words (indulging; see Pretest 2 in Web Appendix A).

Using data manually scraped from Instagram, Study 1 tested the bad-influencer hypothesis by analyzing the effect of content creators' behavior (#indulgence vs. #selfcontrol) on their follower count (H1). Study 2 tested the bad-influencer effect in the context of targets posting about spending their time mindlessly (vs. mindfully; H1) as well as the mediating role of instrumentality expectations (H2). Studies 3 and 4 tested the moderating role of goal commitment (H3a) in the context of targets who use profane (vs. proper) language and in the context of spending time mindlessly (vs. mindfully). In the context of posting about eating indulgent (vs. self-controlled) foods, Study 5 tested the moderating role of goal suppression (H3b). In that same food context, Study 6 again tested the bad-influencer effect and the mediating role of interpersonal instrumentality expectations (H2), as well as the downstream consequences for WOM receptivity (H4; see Fig. 2 for a summary of studies and their mapping onto our theoretical framework). Studies 2, 4, 5, and 6 were preregistered on aspredicted.org. We report all manipulations and measures (in the present manuscript or in Web Appendix B). The data and preregistration files for all studies in the manuscript and supplements can be found on Open Science Framework (OSF) at the following link: https://bit.ly/BadInfluencerEffect

Study 1: Social connection with people posting #indulgence (vs. #selfcontrol)

Method

Study 1 tested the bad-influencer effect in a real social media context. We examined the number of followers—a proxy
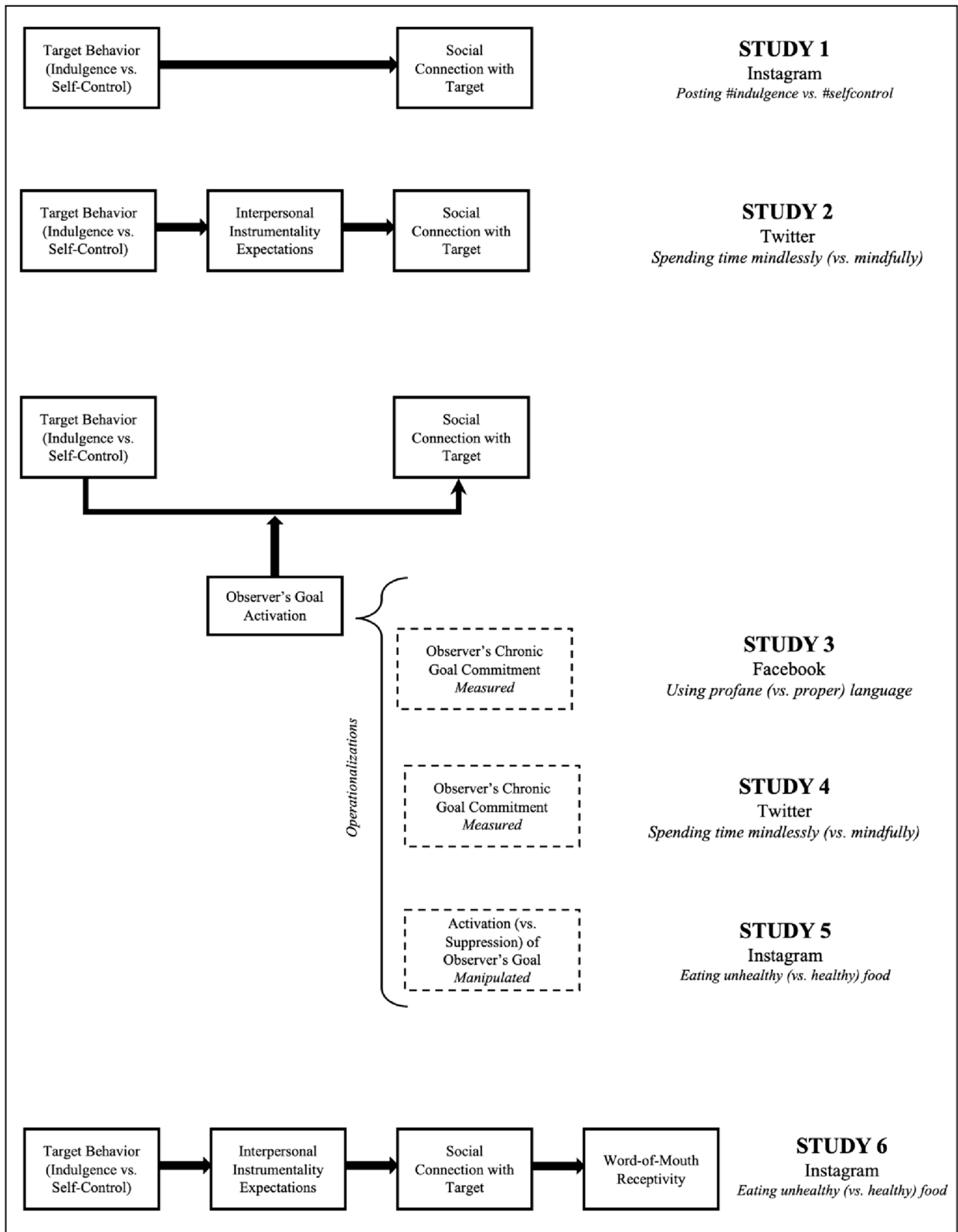
Fig. 2 Summary of studies and their mapping onto the full theoretical model (Fig. 1)

for willingness to connect (WTC)—for Instagram accounts posting with the hashtags "#indulge" and "#indulgence" versus "#willpower" and "#selfcontrol." At the time of data collection, these hashtags had approximately 1.3 M, 750 K, 1.6 M, and 780 K total posts, respectively, making them well matched for our analysis.

A research assistant (RA), blind to our hypotheses, searched each of these four hashtags every day for eleven consecutive days and recorded information about the top nine posts in Instagram's grid[1] for each hashtag ($N = 396$ posts). The RA recorded our focal DV about connection: the follower count of the person posting the hashtag. The RA also recorded the post's position in the Instagram grid (1 to 9), the number of likes and comments on the post, the total number of posts made by that person, any other hashtags the post used, and the username and full text of the post (so that we could eliminate exact duplicates in the dataset). We kept one of each unique post in our dataset (keeping the first, and excluding subsequent, instances), resulting in n = 202 unique posts for our analysis.

Results and discussion

WTC with the poster A t-test of target behavior (1 = #indulge and #indulgence posts, 0 = #willpower and #selfcontrol posts) on follower count (our proxy for WTC) showed the bad-influencer effect: targets posting about their indulgence had fewer followers ($M = 8{,}665.55$, $SD = 20{,}311.15$) than targets posting about their self-control ($M = 73{,}989.46$, $SD = 257{,}774.28$; $t(200) = -2.77$, $p = 0.006$). We found the same negative effect of target indulgence (vs. self-control) on follower count when we included the total number of posts made by the user, the number of hashtags used in the post, and the post's position in the grid as covariates in the linear regression (b = -36,824.05, SE = 11,323.19, $t(197) = -3.25$, $p = 0.001$).

A follow-up study of the top food influencers on Instagram (Supplemental Study 1 in Web Appendix C) showed that the more indulgent (vs. self-controlled) consumers perceived an influencer's content to be, the fewer followers the influencer had—even after controlling for the influencer's total number of posts and total number of accounts followed. In the General Discussion, we provide additional context around these findings, including how and why they may differ from research showing that more indulgent (vs. healthy) posts receive more likes, comments, and shares per follower (Tang et al., 2022).

Taken together, these results provided preliminary real-world support for the bad-influencer hypothesis. However, because cross-sectional data cannot provide causal identification of an effect, the rest of the studies in the present paper rely on experimental designs (manipulating the behavior of the target) to better ascertain a causal link between target behavior and observers' WTC.

Study 2: Mediation by instrumentality expectations

Study 2 moved to a controlled experimental setting to test the bad-influencer effect (H1) and the mediating role of instrumentality expectations (H2) in the context of targets spending their time "mindlessly" (indulging) or "mindfully" (exercising self-control). We also explored several other factors known to play a role in interpersonal judgments and behaviors (e.g., impressions, liking, following), in online and offline contexts, as potential alternative explanations for the bad-influencer effect: the target's (a) perceived authenticity (Valsesia & Diehl, 2022), (b) morality (Gai & Bhattacharjee, 2022; Pradhan et al., 2023), (c) warmth (Tang et al., 2022), (d) sense of humor (Oakes & Slotterback, 2004), (e) credibility (Ao et al., 2023; Ooi et al., 2023), and the degree to which an observer (f) admires (Kim et al., 2022) or (g) has benign envy towards the target (Paredes et al., 2023). Finally, we measured participants' perception that following an indulgent (vs. self-controlled) poster (h) sends a signal that reflects their own self-control traits. Because a consumer will be exposed to a target's content as long as that social media connection is maintained, consumers should be less willing to connect with an indulgent (vs. self-controlled) poster due to expectations they will exert a more negative influence on the consumer's own goals. Furthermore, because goals and identities (self-views) are interrelated (see Touré-Tillery & Gamlin, 2023 for a review), if consumers perceive an indulgent (vs. self-controlled) poster as a bad influence, the prospect of connecting with such a poster should raise concerns not only about their context-relevant goal ("this connection may be detrimental to my goal") but also about their identities ("this connection may signal that I am also indulgent").

Method

Participants

We recruited 233 participants (109 females, 118 males, 6 non-binary; $M_{age} = 34.37$, $SD_{age} = 12.22$) from Prolific to complete this study (paid $0.40). One participant indicated they had taken the survey multiple times, and, as preregistered, we excluded them from the analyses (including them does not change the results).

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[1] The "grid" consists of a collection of the top trending nine posts from each day, across all Instagram accounts using a particular hashtag, arranged in a 3×3 layout.
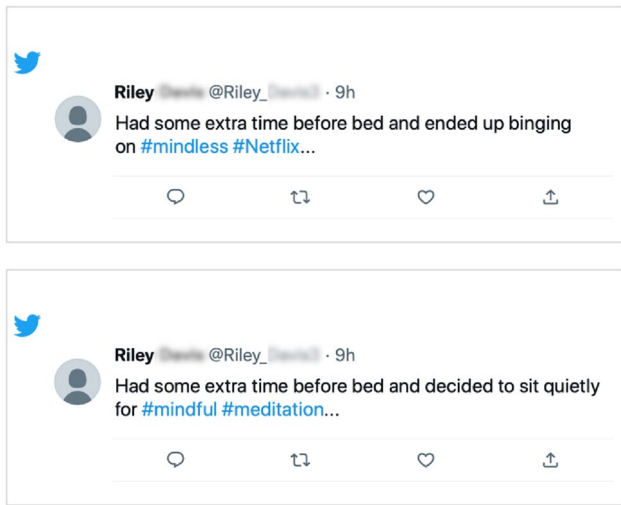
Fig. 3 Twitter posts manipulating the target's behavior—indulging (top), exercising self-controlled (bottom; Study 2)

Design and procedure

The study employed a 2-cell (target's behavior: indulgence vs. self-control) between-subjects design. First, as a manipulation of the target's behavior, participants saw ostensible Twitter posts made by a person named Riley in which, depending on the condition, Riley appeared to exhibit indulgence ("Had some extra time before bed and ended up #binging #Netflix…") or self-control ("Had some extra time before bed and decided to sit quietly for #mindful #meditation…"; see Fig. 3).

Next, as a measure of WTC, participants responded to eight items (e.g., "How likely would you be to follow Riley on Twitter?" "How likely would you be to connect with Riley on social media?" 1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *Extremely;* α = 0.93; adapted from Andersen et al., (1996); see Web Appendix B for all manipulations and measures across studies; see Web Appendix E for details supporting the construct validity of our WTC measure).

We then measured instrumentality expectations using three items (e.g., "What kind of influence do you think Riley's behavior can have on your goals to be mindful with your time?" -3 = *very negative influence*, 0 = *no influence*, 3 = *very positive influence*; α = 0.91; adapted from Rosenberg, (1956) and Fitzsimons and Shah, (2008); see Web Appendix E for construct validity details on this measure). As a manipulation check, participants then responded to, "What are your impressions of Riley?" (a) -3 = *has weak willpower*, 3 = *has strong willpower*, and (b) -3 = *is indulgent*, 3 = *is self-controlled* (r = 0.85, p < 0.001).

Finally, we measured participants' perceptions of Riley's (a) authenticity, (b) morality, (c) warmth, (d) humor, and (e) credibility, the degree to which the participant (f) admires Riley and (g) has benign envy towards Riley, and the degree

to which participants believe that following Riley (h) sends a signal about their own self-control traits.

These eight items were presented in random order in sets of two questions, which were also displayed in random order. Four sets of questions began with the prompt, "Based on the post you just read, would you judge Riley to be…" followed by items assessing the target's perceived (a) authenticity (1 = *a very inauthentic person…*7 = *a very authentic person*, 1 = *a very fake person…*7 = *a very genuine person*; r = 0.93, p < 0.001), (b) morality (1 = *a very immoral person…*7 = *a very moral person*, 1 = *a very sinful person…*7 = *a very virtuous person*; r = 0.71, p < 0.001), (c) warmth (1 = *a very unfriendly person…*7 = *a very friendly person*, 1 = *a very mean person…*7 = *a very nice person*; r = 0.87, p < 0.001), and (d) humor (-3 = *very unfunny…*3 = *very funny*, -3 = *no sense of humor at all…*3 = *a very good sense of humor*; r = 0.81, p < 0.001). Two additional sets of questions (beginning with the prompt, "Based on the post you just read, to what extent do you…") assessed (e) credibility ("think Riley is a credible person / believable person," both 1 = *not at all …*7 = *extremely*; r = 0.80, p < 0.001) and (f) admiration ("admire Riley," and "hold Riley in high regard," both 1 = *not at all …*7 = *extremely*; r = 0.84, p < 0.001). The next set of questions assessed (g) benign envy ("To what extent… are you frustrated by your inability to behave like Riley / do you feel discouraged that you don't act more like Riley?" 1 = *not at all …*7 = *extremely*; r = 0.81, p < 0.001). The final set of questions began with the prompt, "To what extent would following Riley…" followed by items assessing (h) perceived signal ("signal that you are the kind of person who values willpower," and "send the message that you are the kind of person who values self-control," 1 = *not at all …*7 = *extremely*; r = 0.90, p < 0.001).

Participants also responded to questions about Riley's perceived age (1 = *Gen Z*, 2 = *Millennial*, 3 = *Gen X*, 4 = *Baby Boomer*), gender (1 = *man,* 2 = *woman,* 3 = *other*), and follower count (open-ended). Finally, participants responded to a basic demographic questionnaire (age, gender) and indicated whether they had taken a similar survey in the past.

Results and discussion

Manipulation check

A t-test of perceived self-control by target's behavior (indulgence = 1, self-control = 0) confirmed the TV-binging target (M = 3.35, SD = 0.98) was perceived as less self-controlled than the mindfully-meditating target (M = 5.13, SD = 1.23; t(230) = -12.25, p < 0.001, η² = 0.39).

WTC

Participants were less willing to connect with the indulgent target (M = 3.49, SD = 1.15) than with the self-controlled

target ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.35$; $t(230) = -2.05$, $p = 0.04$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$).

Interpersonal instrumentality expectations

The indulgent target ($M = 0.91$, $SD = 0.94$) garnered more negative interpersonal instrumentality expectations than the self-controlled target ($M = 1.92$, $SD = 0.98$; $t(230) = -8.02$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.22$).

Alternative mechanisms

Compared to the self-controlled target, participants perceived the indulgent target as (a) equally authentic ($M_{\text{indulgence}} = 4.70$, $SD_{\text{indulgence}} = 1.14$ vs. $M_{\text{self-control}} = 4.44$, $SD_{\text{self-control}} = 1.34$; $t(230) = 1.59$, $p = 0.11$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$); (b) less moral ($M_{\text{indulgence}} = 4.17$, $SD_{\text{indulgence}} = 0.64$ vs. $M_{\text{self-control}} = 4.74$, $SD_{\text{self-control}} = 0.88$; $t(230) = -5.52$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.12$); (c) less warm ($M_{\text{indulgence}} = 4.76$, $SD_{\text{indulgence}} = 0.95$ vs. $M_{\text{self-control}} = 5.06$, $SD_{\text{self-control}} = 0.93$; $t(230) = -2.44$, $p = 0.02$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$); (d) more humorous ($M_{\text{indulgence}} = 4.37$, $SD_{\text{indulgence}} = 1.02$ vs. $M_{\text{self-control}} = 3.80$, $SD_{\text{self-control}} = 0.90$; $t(230) = 4.49$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.10$); (e) more credible ($M_{\text{indulgence}} = 4.68$, $SD_{\text{indulgence}} = 1.32$ vs. $M_{\text{self-control}} = 4.39$, $SD_{\text{self-control}} = 1.15$; $t(230) = 1.93$, $p = 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$) and (f) less admirable ($M_{\text{indulgence}} = 2.97$, $SD_{\text{indulgence}} = 1.25$ vs. $M_{\text{self-control}} = 3.65$, $SD_{\text{self-control}} = 1.34$; $t(230) = -3.99$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$). Compared to the self-controlled target, the indulging target elicited (g) less benign envy ($M_{\text{indulgence}} = 1.66$, $SD_{\text{indulgence}} = 1.06$ vs. $M_{\text{self-control}} = 2.12$, $SD_{\text{self-control}} = 1.33$; $t(230) = -2.93$, $p = 0.004$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$). Finally, compared to the self-controlled target, participants felt that following the indulging target would send (h) a more negative signal about their own self-control ($M_{\text{indulgence}} = 2.81$, $SD_{\text{indulgence}} = 1.26$ vs. $M_{\text{self-control}} = 4.03$, $SD_{\text{self-control}} = 1.48$; $t(230) = -6.71$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.16$).

Mediation analysis

To test whether the effect of target behavior on consumers' WTC occurs through instrumentality expectations or through any of the eight alternative processes (authenticity, morality, warmth, humor, credibility, admiration, benign envy, or perceived signal), we conducted a multiple mediation analysis with 5,000 replications (PROCESS Model 4; Hayes, 2018).[2] As expected, we found a significant and negative mean indirect

effect through instrumentality expectations (-0.28; 95% CI [-0.43, -0.16]), indicating that instrumentality expectations mediated the bad-influencer effect.

We also found a significant positive indirect effect through humor (0.17; 95% CI [0.06, 0.32]), and significant negative indirect effects through admiration (-0.15; 95% CI [-0.29, -0.05]), benign envy (-0.05; 95% CI [-0.11, -0.002]), and perceived signal (-0.19; 95% CI [-0.33, -0.06]). The indirect effects through authenticity (-0.01; 95% CI [-0.07, 0.03]), morality (-0.07; 95% CI [-0.20, 0.04]), warmth (-0.02; 95% CI [-0.09, 0.04]), and credibility (0.05; 95% CI [-0.008, 0.04]) were not significant, suggesting that these factors are unlikely to account for the bad-influencer effect (see Table 1 for a summary). We note that, taken together, these positive, negative, and null effects also suggest the bad-influencer effect is unlikely to stem from a halo effect, whereby participants evaluate the indulgent (vs. self-controlled) target more negatively along *all* dimensions (Lachman & Bass, 1985; Thorndike, 1920).

Next, we explored the relative strengths of the indirect effect through instrumentality and the other four significant pathways (humor, admiration, benign envy, and perceived signal) using the lavaan package in R. The results showed that the indirect effect through instrumentality expectations was significantly larger than the indirect effects through humor (B = -0.47, SE = 0.08, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [-0.63, -0.31]), admiration (B = -0.15, SE = 0.08, $p = 0.062$, 95% CI [-0.31, 0.0074]), and benign envy (B = 0.25, SE = 0.07, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [-0.39, -0.11]). However, there was no difference in the strengths of indirect effects through instrumentality expectations and perceived signal (B = -0.12, SE = 0.08, $p = 0.17$, 95% CI [-0.28, 0.05]). This result is consistent with our theory because of the substantial interplay between goals and identities. Goal pursuit can shape identities; for instance, people who pursue health goals (e.g., eating healthily, exercising regularly) are perceived, and perceive themselves, as health-conscious. Conversely, identities affect goal selection, such that health-conscious people are more likely to pursue health goals (see Touré-Tillery & Gamlin, 2023 for a review). We argue that observers are less willing to connect with an indulgent (vs. self-controlled) target due to expectations they will exert a more negative influence on the observer's own goals (a bad influence). Furthermore, because goals and identities are interrelated, if observers believe an indulgent (vs. self-controlled) poster will be a bad influence, the prospect of connecting with such as poster should raise concerns not only about their context-relevant goal ("this connection might harm my goal") but also about their identities ("connecting with them may signal that I too am indulgent").

Discussion

Study 2 provided additional evidence for the bad-influencer effect (H1) and the predominant role of instrumentality expectations in this effect (H2) above and beyond several

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[2] To assess whether multicollinearity was an issue in our analysis, and specifically high correlation between instrumentality expectations and each of the eight alternative mechanisms, we computed the variance inflation factor (VIF) for each predictor on WTC. No predictor's VIF exceeds 5 (all VIF's ≤ 3.02), which indicates that multicollinearity is not a significant issue based on existing rules-of-thumb (Marcoulides and Raykov 2019). See Additional Analysis in Web Appendix D for full results.

Table 1 The bad-influencer effect is mediated by instrumentality expectations, in addition to perceived signal, and, to a lesser extent, by admiration, benign envy, and humor (Study 2)

Mediators (M)	Effect of Target Behavior (IV) on Mediator (M)	Mediator (M) Effect on WTC (DV)	Indirect Effect of Mediator (M)
Instrumentality Expectations	-1.00 (0.13)***	0.28 (0.06)***	-0.28 (95% CI [-0.43, -0.16])
Perceived Signal	-1.22 (0.18)***	0.16 (0.05)**	-0.19 (95% CI [-0.33, -0.06])
Admiration	-0.68 (0.17)***	0.22 (0.06)**	-0.15 (95% CI [-0.29, -0.05])
Morality	-0.58 (0.10)***	0.12 (0.09) $^{n.s}$	-0.07 (95% CI [-0.20, 0.04])
Benign Envy	-0.45 (0.16)**	0.10 (0.05)*	-0.05 (95% CI [-0.11, -0.002])
Warmth	-0.30 (0.12)*	0.06 (0.08) $^{n.s}$	-0.02 (95% CI [-0.09, 0.04])
Authenticity	0.24 (0.16) $^{n.s}$	-0.06 (0.07) $^{n.s}$	-0.01 (95% CI [-0.07, 0.03])
Credibility	0.26 (0.15)^{Ŧ}	0.18 (0.07)**	0.05 (95% CI [-0.008, 0.04])
Humor	0.56 (0.13)***	0.30 (0.07)***	0.17 (95% CI [0.06, 0.32])

^{Ŧ} $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

other alternative processes. In Supplemental Study 2 (Web Appendix C), we tested more alternative mediators (e.g., similarity, expressiveness, competence) and found instrumentality expectations to once again be the strongest driver of the bad-influencer effect. Furthermore, several follow-up analyses on the present study (e.g., factor analysis of all mediators, exploring the role of the target's demographics; Web Appendix D) provided additional support for the predominant role of instrumentality expectations in the bad-influencer effect.

We note that, like most human responses, the bad-influencer effect is multiply determined. We find that despite being perceived as more humorous (a positive trait), the indulgent (vs. self-controlled) poster still elicits a lower WTC. Importantly, the other significant mediators identified in this study (admiration, benign envy, perceived signal) are all consistent with our theorizing about the psychological process underlying the bad-influencer effect. Indeed, consumers should expect someone they consider a bad influence to be less admirable, less enviable, and a social connection that would send the "wrong" kind of signal.

Study 3: Moderation by goal commitment and establishing a "bad," rather than "good," influencer effect

Study 3 tested the moderating role of chronic goal activation—operationalized using a measure of goal commitment—on the effect of a target's behavior (indulgence vs. self-control) on a consumer's willingness to connect (WTC; H3a). This study was also designed to show that effects are driven by a "bad," rather than a "good," influencer. To test this hypothesis, we moved to the domain of cursing. Prior self-control research has deemed using curse words as indicative of a failure to exercise self-control (Gailliot et al., 2007; Jay & Janschewitz, 2012). Participants viewed a social media post made by a target who either cursed about

the weather (indulging) or refrained from cursing (exercising self-control). We then measured participants' WTC with the target and their commitment to the goal of using proper language. We expected to replicate the bad-influencer effect for participants who were more committed to this goal, and we predicted the effect would attenuate or disappear for participants who were less committed to this goal.

Method

Participants

We recruited 201 adults from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk; 98 females, 102 males, 1 non-binary; $M_{age} = 36.93$, $SD_{age} = 13.01$) to take part in this study (paid $0.50). No participants were excluded from our analyses.

Design and procedure

The study employed a 2 (target's behavior: indulgence vs. self-control) × goal commitment (measured) between-subjects design. A pretest revealed that the goal to speak properly and refrain from cursing varied more widely in importance in this participant pool (compared to health or mindfulness goals; Web Appendix A), making this an ideal domain to test the moderating role of goal commitment.

For our main study, we randomly assigned participants to view one of two Facebook posts where a target used (vs. refrained from using) curse words. All participants first read, "Imagine that you are looking through social media posts made by friends of your friends, and you see the following post made by a user named Alex." Participants were randomly assigned to read the post made by the indulgent [self-controlled] target (Fig. 4):

> "OMFG [OMG] – is anyone else completely confused by the shitty [crazy] weather this winter? What

Indulgence Condition

Self-Control Condition

Fig. 4 Social media posts manipulating the target's behavior—indulgence (left), self-control (right; Study 3)

the hell [What in the world]. First, no snow in January or February. And as if that didn't suck [wasn't bad] enough, we get dumped on in March. Where the fuck is [Where is] spring? April, please bring us some nice spring weather! #shittyweather [#crazyweather]"

After viewing one of these two Facebook posts, participants responded to eight WTC items (e.g., "How likely would you be to accept a Facebook friend-request from Alex?" 1 = *Extremely Unlikely*, 7 = *Extremely Likely*; α = 0.95) and three items to check our manipulation of target's behavior ("What are your impressions of Alex?" (a) 1 = *Indulgent*, 7 = *Restrained*, (b) 1 = *Impulsive*, 7 = *Self-disciplined*, and (c) 1 = *Scattered*, 7 = *Focused*; α = 0.88).

Next, participants answered basic demographic questions, followed by our measure of goal commitment. Participants saw the prompt, "How important is it for you to" followed by fifteen randomized items, including three items measuring the focal goal: "Avoid using swear words," "Refrain from cursing," and "Avoid using offensive language" (each 1 = *Not at all important*, 7 = *Very important*), which we averaged to create an index of goal commitment (α = 0.95). A pretest also confirmed that the goal to refrain from cursing was the least important goal (compared to health or mindfulness goals, for example), and varied the most among this population (Pretest 2 in Web Appendix A). Participants were debriefed and compensated for their participation.

Results and discussion

Manipulation check

To ensure our manipulation was successful, we examined the effect of target behavior (indulgence = 1, self-control = 0)

on participants' perceptions of target self-control, which showed the indulging target was perceived as less self-controlled (M = 2.48, SD = 1.10) compared to the target exercising self-control (M = 3.74, SD = 1.14; $t(199) = 63.12$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.24$). To confirm that our manipulation had no effect on our proposed moderator and that our measure of goal commitment captured a stable motivation, we examined the effect of target behavior on goal commitment and found no relationship ($t(199) = 0.21$, $p = 0.84$).

Moderation by goal commitment

We ran a regression of target behavior, mean-centered goal commitment (M = 3.67, SD = 2.05), and the interaction of these two factors on WTC with the target. This analysis showed a main effect of target behavior such that the indulging target elicited lower WTC (M = 3.08, SD = 1.41) than the target exercising self-control (M = 4.40, SD = 1.11; $t(197) = -7.69$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.21$). There was no main effect of goal commitment on WTC ($t(197) = 0.83$, $p = 0.41$). Finally, the predicted interaction of target behavior by goal commitment emerged ($t(197) = -3.92$, $p < 0.001$; Fig. 5).

A Johnson-Neyman analysis (Model 1 of the PROCESS Macro for SPSS) showed that the effect of target behavior on WTC was significant at and above a value of goal commitment of 1.26 ($\beta_{JN} = -0.52$, SE = 0.26), with 82.1% of the data falling above this point. Specifically, participants with levels of goal commitment greater than 1.26 (2.42 standard deviations below the mean of goal commitment) were less willing to connect with the indulgent (vs. self-controlled) target. However, for participants with levels of goal commitment lower than 1.26, there was no difference in willingness to connect with the indulgent and self-controlled target.

We then turned to the slope of the effect for each condition (indulgence and self-control), examining the effect of goal commitment on WTC. This analysis shows that, for
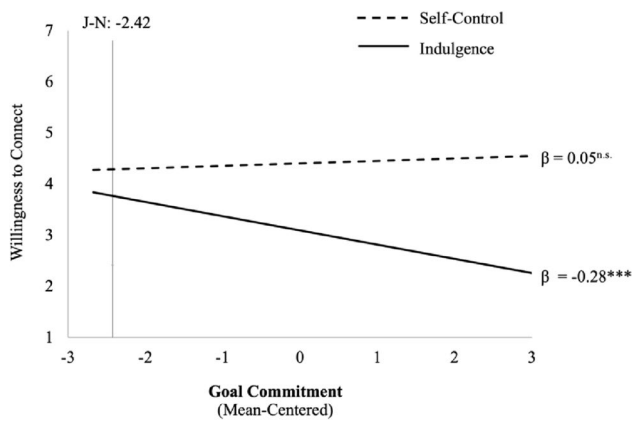
Fig. 5 Goal commitment moderates the bad-influencer effect

participants considering the self-controlled target, goal commitment had no simple effect on WTC ($\beta = 0.05$, SE $= 0.06$, $t(197) = 0.83$, $p = 0.41$). Conversely, for participants considering the indulgent target, goal commitment had a significant negative simple effect on WTC ($\beta = -0.28$, SE $= 0.06$, $t(197) = -4.63$, $p < 0.001$). This analysis allowed us to explore whether our studies so far had documented a bad-influencer or a good-influencer effect, and the results support a bad (rather than good) influencer effect: When a target exercises self-control, there is no effect of a consumer's goal commitment on WTC; however, when a target indulges, the stronger a consumer's goal commitment in that domain, the less willing they are to connect with that target.

This study demonstrated that a target who is indulging/cursing elicits lower WTC than a target who is self-controlled/restraining from cursing (H1). Further, this relationship is moderated by goal commitment such that the more committed the observer is to the goal of using proper language, the less willing they are to connect with the indulgent (vs. self-controlled) target; however, when the observer is less committed to the goal, they are equally willing to connect with an indulgent and self-controlled target (H3a).

Study 4: Moderation by commitment to mindfulness goals

Study 4 provided another test of the moderating role of goal commitment in the bad-influencer effect (H3a) returning to the mindfulness context of Study 2.

Method

Participants

We recruited 440 adults (235 females; 193 males, 12 non-binary; $M_{age} = 32.25$, SD $= 11.31$) from Prolific to complete this study (paid $0.35). We did not exclude any participants.

Design and procedure

The study employed a 2 (target's behavior: indulgence vs. self-control) $\times$ 2 (goal commitment: high vs. moderate) between-subjects design with the first factor manipulated experimentally and the second factor measured. Participants viewed the same manipulation of the target's behavior (mindless-TV-watching vs. mindful-meditation), completed a similar eight-item measure of willingness to connect (WTC; $\alpha = 0.94$), and responded to the same manipulation check of target behavior ($r = 0.87$, $p < 0.001$) as in Study 2.

Research shows that having a specific goal (e.g., following the Keto diet, meditating twice a week) increases goal commitment and motivation relative to having a non-specific or vague goal (e.g., eating better, being mindful; Locke & Latham, 1990; Locke et al., 1981; Wright & Kacmar, 1994). Thus, toward the end of the survey, as part of a brief demographic questionnaire, we measured participants' goal commitment by asking them: "Do you currently have a goal to meditate regularly?" ($1 = yes$, $0 = no$). We categorized the 31.8% of participants ($n = 140$) who had set a specific goal to mediate regularly as highly committed to a mindfulness goal, and we categorized the remaining 68.2% of participants ($n = 300$) as moderately[3] committed to mindfulness goals.

Results and discussion

Manipulation check

A t-test confirmed the target watching Netflix was perceived to have less self-control ($M = -1.08$, SD $= 1.20$) than the meditating target ($M = 1.13$, SD $= 1.31$; $t(438) = -18.38$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.44$).

Moderation by goal commitment

A 2 (target's behavior: indulgence $= 1$, self-control $= 0$) $\times$ 2 (goal commitment: moderate $= 0$, high $= 1$) ANOVA on WTC showed the bad-influencer effect ($F(1, 436) = 35.93$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.07$), and a main effect of goal commitment ($F(1, 436) = 32.55$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$). Most importantly, the predicted interaction of target behavior$\times$goal commitment emerged ($F(1, 436) = 6.70$, $p = 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$), such that the bad-influencer effect was stronger among participants highly committed

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[3] We classified these participants as "moderately" committed due to our pretest (see Pretest 1 in Web Appendix A) that showed that most participants in our pool are at least moderately committed to mindfulness goals (e.g., spending their time mindfully, watching less TV) even if they don't have a specific meditation practice. Setting (vs. lacking) a specific meditation goal therefore better maps onto high (vs. moderate) commitment to mindfulness goals.
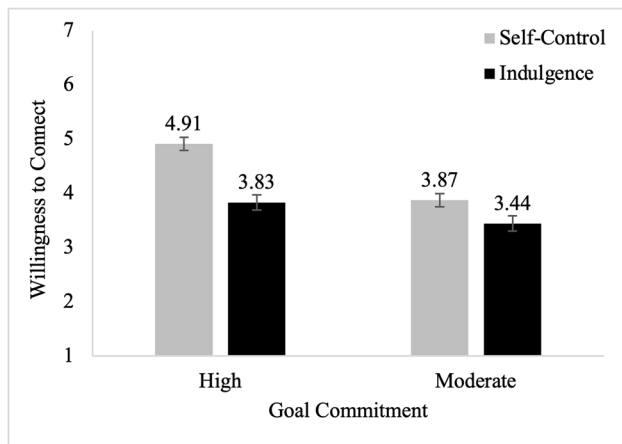
Fig. 6 Consumers' goal commitment moderates the bad-influencer effect (Study 4)

to the goal. Specifically, pairwise comparisons showed the difference in WTC was greater for participants highly committed to the goal ($M_{\text{indulgence}} = 3.83$ vs. $M_{\text{self-control}} = 4.91$; $t(138) = -4.79$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.14$), compared with consumers moderately committed to the goal ($M_{\text{indulgence}} = 3.44$ vs. $M_{\text{self-control}} = 3.87$; $t(298) = -3.16$, $p = 0.003$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$; Fig. 6).

Discussion

Study 4 supported our hypothesis about the moderating role of goal commitment in the bad-influencer effect (H3a), demonstrating the goal-dependent nature of this effect. We find the bad-influencer effect occurs among all participants with a mindfulness goal and is amplified for those who are highly committed to this goal. Supplemental Study 3 (Web Appendix C) replicates this effect in the context of healthy-eating goals.

Study 5: Moderation by goal suppression

Study 5 tested the moderating role of situational goal activation and suppression in the bad-influencer effect (H3b) in the context of posting about food on social media.

Method

Participants

We recruited 447 participants on MTurk (228 females, 215 males, 3 non-binary; $M_{\text{age}} = 37.91$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.37$) to complete this study (paid $0.50). As preregistered, we excluded four participants who provided nonsensical responses to the goal activation/suppression manipulation. The pattern and level of significance of our results do not change when these participants are included.

Design and procedure

The study employed a 2 (target's behavior: indulgence vs. self-control) × 2 (health goal: activated vs. suppressed) between-subjects design. First, for the health goal manipulation, we asked participants to either list two reasons why it is important to them to "maintain a healthy lifestyle and eat healthy foods" (activated health goal) or to list two reasons why it is important to them to "seize the day and enjoy the present moment" (suppressed health goal). Because adhering to long-term goals such as eating healthily entails forgoing immediate pleasure (e.g., enjoying a tasty cake) for the sake of long-term benefits (e.g., physical health and fitness), we expected long-term goals to be less top-of-mind for participants who wrote about enjoying the present moment. By contrast, writing about why the health goal (maintaining a healthy lifestyle and eating healthy foods) is important increases the salience of this goal (Shah et al., 2002). A pretest confirmed that, for participants who listed reasons why "enjoying the present moment" is important, long-term health goals were less top-of-mind than for participants who listed reasons why "maintaining a healthy lifestyle" is important (Pretest 3 in Web Appendix A).

In the main study, as a manipulation of the target's behavior, participants viewed a social media post by a user named Alex, which, depending on the condition, featured either unhealthy foods (indulgence) or healthy foods (self-control). We then assessed willingness to connect (WTC) using a 9-item measure (e.g., "How likely would you be to follow Alex on Instagram?" 1 = *Extremely Unlikely*, 7 = *Extremely Likely*; α = 0.94). Participants then responded to the same manipulations check as in Study 2 ($r = 0.92$, $p < 0.001$).

Finally, we included two exploratory items measuring how fun the target seemed, to test as an alternative process explanation for the bad-influencer effect: "What are your impressions of Alex?" Alex… (a) 1 = *is boring*, 7 = *is fun*, (b) 1 = *doesn't enjoy life*, 7 = *enjoys life*" ($r = 0.74$, $p < 0.001$; see Additional Analysis in Web Appendix D). Finally, participants responded to a basic demographic questionnaire.

Results and discussion

Manipulation check

A 2 (target's behavior: indulgence = 1, self-control = 0) × 2 (goal: activated = 1, suppressed = 0) ANOVA showed a main effect of target behavior ($F(1, 439) = 726.45$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.63$), no effect of goal ($F(1, 439) = 1.24$, $p = 0.27$, $\eta^2 = 0.001$), and a significant interaction between these factors ($F(1, 439) = 4.70$, $p = 0.03$, $\eta^2 = 0.004$). When the goal was suppressed, participants perceived the target who made unhealthy food choices to have less self-control

Fig. 7 Goal suppression moderates the bad-influencer effect (Study 5)
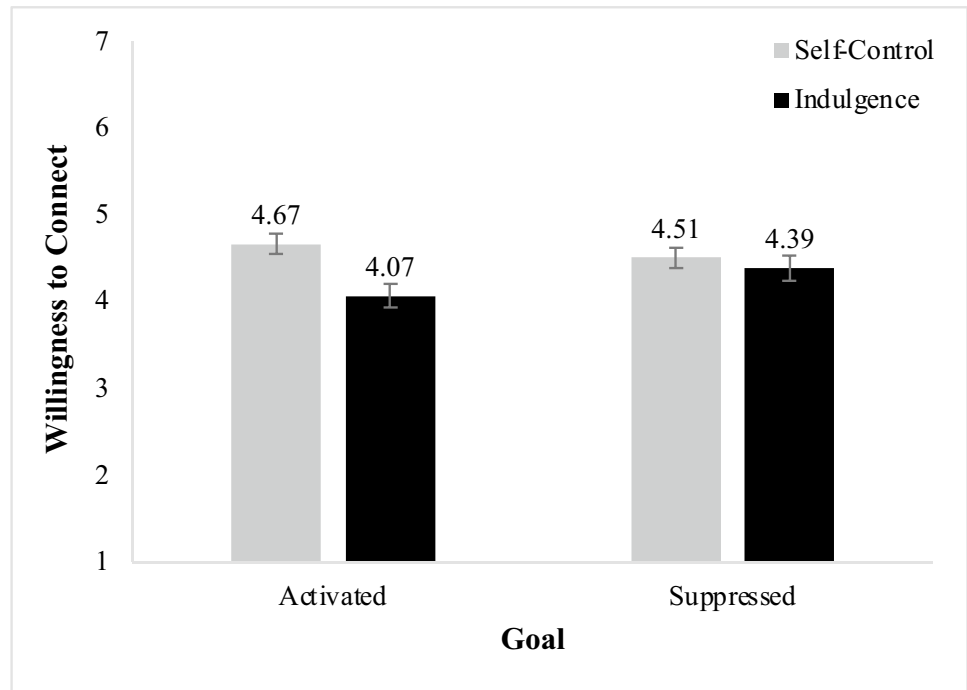
$(M = 2.76, SD = 1.55)$ than the target posting about healthy foods $(M = 5.77, SD = 1.06; t(439) = -17.42, p < 0.001)$, and this effect was amplified when the goal was activated $(M_{indulgence} = 2.36, SD = 1.33$ vs. $M_{self\text{-}control} = 5.90, SD = 1.10; t(439) = -20.72, p < 0.001)$. Thus, in both goal conditions, the target's behavior manipulation produced the intended effect.

WTC

A 2 (target behavior) $\times$ 2 (goal condition) ANOVA showed a main effect of target behavior $(F(1, 439) = 8.18, p = 0.004, \eta^2 = 0.03)$, but no main effect of the goal condition $(F(1, 439) = 0.42, p = 0.52, \eta^2 = 0.001)$. Importantly, the predicted interaction between these factors emerged $(F(1, 439) = 3.73, p = 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.01)$. When the health goal was activated, participants were less willing to connect with the target who indulged $(M = 4.07, SD = 1.30)$ than with the one who exercised self-control $(M = 4.67, SD = 1.31; t(439) = -3.41, p < 0.001$; i.e., the bad-influencer effect). However, this effect disappeared when the goal was suppressed $(M_{indulgence} = 4.39, SD = 1.31$ vs. $M_{self\text{-}control} = 4.51, SD = 1.36; p = 0.51$; Fig. 7).

Discussion

Study 5 supported our hypothesis about the moderating role of goal activation/suppression (H3b), providing further evidence for the goal-dependent nature of the bad-influencer effect.

Study 6: Downstream consequences of willingness to connect

Study 6 tested the mediating role of interpersonal instrumentality expectations in the bad-influencer effect (H2) in the context of food choices posted to social media and tested the downstream consequences of changes in willingness to connect (WTC) on word-of-mouth (WOM) receptivity in another domain (product preferences; H4).

Method

Participants

We recruited 473[4] participants (258 females, 208 males, 7 non-binary; $M_{age} = 34.21, SD_{age} = 12.12$) from Prolific to complete this study (paid \$0.45). As preregistered, we excluded four participants who took the study multiple times, leaving n = 469 participants for our analyses. The pattern and significance of the results are unchanged when these participants are included.

Design and procedure

The study employed a 2-cell (target's behavior: indulgence vs. self-control) between-subjects design. First, all

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[4] Note: We retained all overfill responses, which exceeded our preregistered sample size. Not all participants responded to every measure, which is reflected in the degrees of freedom in our analyses.

participants read that they would see social media posts by a user named Alex (target) and were randomly assigned to see five posts made by Alex to mimic the feeling of scrolling social media. Depending on the condition, the posts contained collages of images of either unhealthy (indulgence) or healthy (self-control) foods that Alex consumed. In addition, the final post included Alex's WOM recommendation: an ostensibly paid promotion for the PhotoGrid app that Alex used to create their social media photo collages, "shoutout to @photogrid for keeping my social media photos fresh #ad #sponsored" (Fig. 8 and Web Appendix B).

Second, participants answered eight questions assessing their WTC with Alex ($\alpha = 0.96$; e.g., "How likely would you be to follow Alex on Instagram?" and "How likely would you be to accept a Facebook friend request from Alex?" both $1 = $ *Extremely Unlikely*, $7 = $ *Extremely Likely*).

Third, participants answered two questions assessing their receptivity to the WOM recommendations made by the target, "How interested are you in using PhotoGrid?" and "How likely are you to download PhotoGrid?" ($1 = $ *not at all*, $7 = $ *very*; $r = 0.92$, $p < 0.001$). Fourth, participants responded to the same three questions measuring their instrumentality expectations of the target as in Study 2, adapted to the context (e.g., "What kind of influence do you think Alex's behavior can have on your health goals?" $-3 = $ *very negative influence*, $0 = $ *no influence*, $3 = $ *very positive influence*; $\alpha = 0.94$). Finally, participants completed the same manipulation check of target behavior as in Study 2 ($r = 0.87$, $p < 0.001$) and provided basic demographic information.

Results and discussion

Manipulation check

A t-test of perceived self-control by the target's behavior (indulgence = 1, self-control = 0) confirmed participants perceived the target posting about unhealthy foods as less self-controlled ($M = -1.34$, $SD = 1.67$) than the target posting about healthy foods ($M = 1.63$, $SD = 1.17$; $t(467) = -22.35$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.52$).

WTC

Participants had lower WTC with the indulgent target ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.56$) than with the self-controlled target ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.51$; $t(467) = -2.38$, $p = 0.02$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$).

Mediation analysis

The indulgent target garnered more negative interpersonal instrumentality expectations ($M = -0.51$, $SD = 1.36$) than the self-controlled target ($M = 0.89$, $SD = 1.26$; $t(467) = -11.53$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.22$). To test whether the effect of the target's

behavior on WTC occurred through instrumentality expectations, we used the bootstrap test of the indirect effect (PROCESS Model 4; Hayes, 2018). With 5,000 replications, we found the mean indirect effect was negative and significant ($a \times b = -1.01$; 95% CI [-1.20, -0.83]), indicating that instrumentality expectations mediated the relationship between the poster's behavior and participants' WTC (Fig. 9).

Downstream consequences

Finally, we tested our hypothesis (H4) about the effect of WTC on WOM receptivity. A linear regression showed that greater WTC predicted higher WOM receptivity ($\beta = 0.61$, $t(467) = 16.61$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, lower WTC with a target reduces receptivity to that target's WOM recommendations.

We also conducted a serial mediation analysis to examine whether the target's behavior (indulgence = 1, self-control = 0) influenced WOM receptivity through instrumentality expectations and WTC, sequentially. Using the bootstrap test of the indirect effect (PROCESS Model 6; Hayes, 2018), we found a significant mean indirect effect ($a_1 \times d_{21} \times b_2 = -0.63$; 95% CI [-0.81, -0.46]), indicating the bad-influencer effect occurs through instrumentality expectations and has a downstream effect on WOM receptivity (Fig. 10).

Discussion

Study 6 documented the bad-influencer effect (H1) in the context of food choices, and its downstream consequences on WOM (H4) in the context of product interest. Additionally, this study provided further evidence for the mediating role of instrumentality expectations in the bad-influencer effect (H2). A follow-up study (see Supplemental Study 4 in Web Appendix C) replicated these effects using a within-subject design and measuring receptivity to WOM via participants' charitable donations to a non-profit recommended by the target.

General discussion

The present research introduces the bad-influencer effect, whereby consumers are less willing to connect with a content creator on social media who is indulging (vs. exercising self-control).

Using data scraped from social media, we found that social media users who post about indulgence (vs. self-control) garner lower willingness to connect (WTC) in the form of fewer followers (H1; Study 1 and Supplemental Study 1). We find that interpersonal instrumentality expectations—the degree to which the target is expected to have a positive or negative influence on the observer's own valued

Fig. 8 Top: Example of social media posts manipulating the target's behavior—indulgence (left), self-control (right); Bottom: WOM recommendation (Study 6)
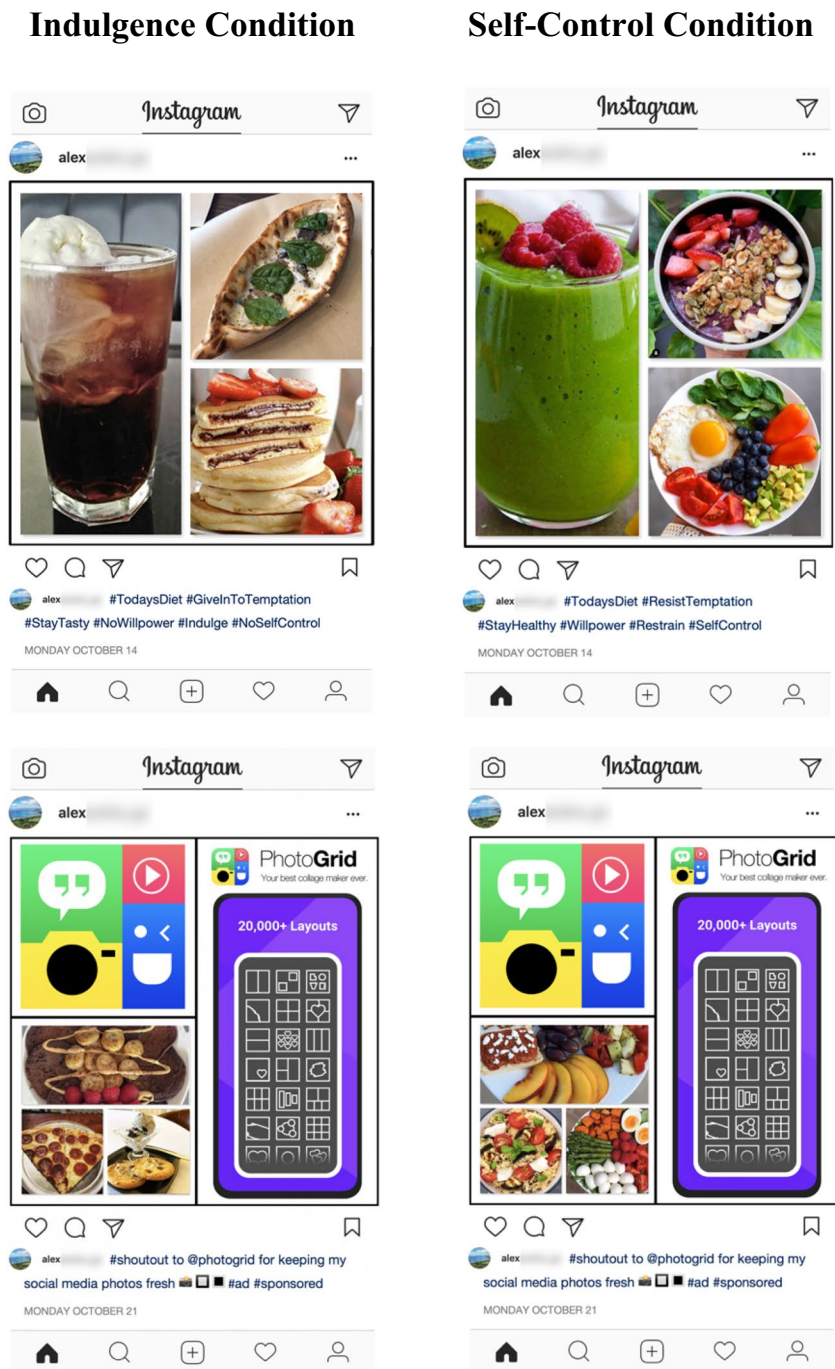
goals—mediate the bad-influencer effect (H2; Study 2 and Supplemental Study 2).

In line with the notion that the bad-influencer effect stems from consumers' desire to achieve the goals they value, we find that the effect is stronger the more (vs. less) committed participants are to the goal (H3a; Studies 3 and 4, and Supplemental Study 3). In addition, we find that temporarily suppressing participants health goal attenuates the bad-influencer effect in the context of indulgent (vs. self-controlled) food posts (H3b; Study 5). Finally, we find the

bad-influencer effect has downstream consequences for word-of mouth (WOM) receptivity: the lower participants' WTC with a poster, the lower their receptivity to WOM from that poster (H4; Study 6 and Supplemental Study 4).

Theoretical contributions

Our findings on the bad-influencer effect contribute to three streams of literature: interpersonal influences on goals, factors affecting social connection with digital content creators,
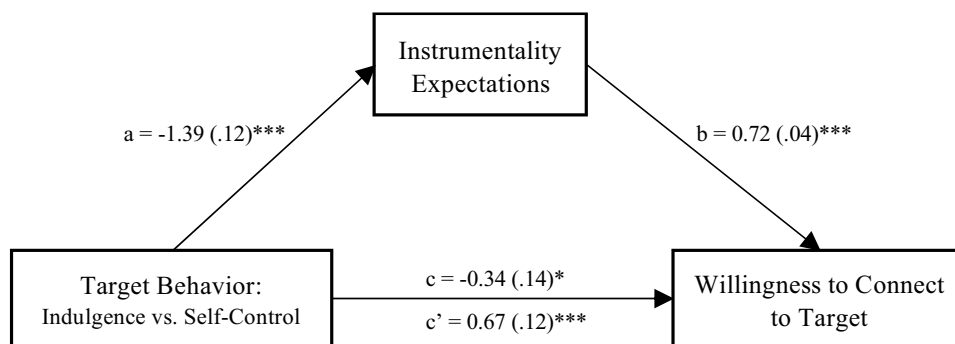
Fig. 9 Interpersonal instrumentality expectations mediate the bad-influencer effect (Study 6). Note: $^{*} p < 0.05$, $^{**} p < 0.01$, $^{***} p < 0.001$; c = total effect, c' = direct effect; parentheses indicate standard error; Note that the significant *positive* direct effect is indicative of a suppression effect (MacKinnon et al., 2000), whereby the media-

tor (instrumentality expectations) exhibits a strong enough positive relationship with the dependent variable (WTC) to outweigh the total effect (of target behavior on WTC) and thus change the sign of the direct effect
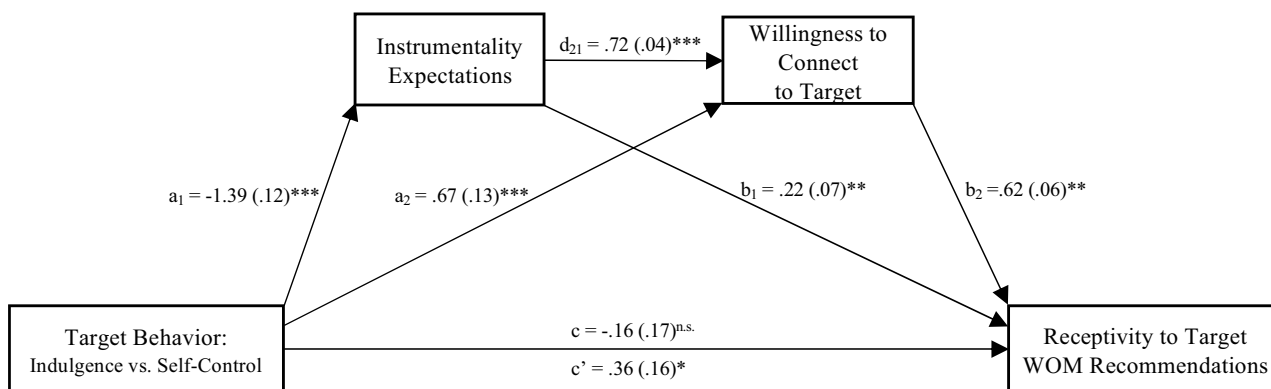

Fig. 10 The bad-influencer effect occurs through instrumentality expectations and has downstream consequences for WOM receptivity (Study 6). Note: $^{*} p < 0.05$, $^{**} p < 0.01$, $^{***} p < 0.001$; c = total effect, c' = direct effect; parentheses indicate standard error. Note again that, as depicted in Fig. 9, the significant *positive* direct effects of target

behavior on WTC and on WOM receptivity are indicative of suppression effects (MacKinnon et al., 2000) and are due to the strong positive relationship that instrumentality expectations exert on these dependent variables

and influencer marketing. First, the present research expands our understanding of interpersonal instrumentality, which has previously focused on close friends and family (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2018) or unknown peers with explicit instrumentality through verbal declarations (Slotter & Gardner, 2011) or joint goal-pursuit (Huang et al., 2015). We demonstrate that *expectations* about a stranger's instrumentality can arise from their behavior on social media, even without any direct interaction or collaboration with the observer. This finding broadens the scope of interpersonal instrumentality research by revealing its relevance in the context of online social media relationships.

Second, our research builds upon prior literature showing that a friend's personal success or failure on a goal is independent of their instrumentality for that goal and does not determine closeness to that friend (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Study 3). We found that, in contrast, a stranger's

apparent acts of indulgence or self-control on social media shape both instrumentality expectations and social connection. This highlights key differences between existing and new relationships and underscores the importance of understanding the role of online behavior in forming social connections.

Third, our work contributes to the emerging literature exploring factors affecting social connection with (or avoidance of) content creators, social media influencers ("SMIs"), or people sharing posts online (Barbe et al., 2020; Barta et al., 2023; Morton, 2020; Pradhan et al., 2023; Valsesia & Diehl, 2022). Social connection is crucial in online spaces, since the more connections a content creator has, the more desirable they become for marketing managers seeking to reach the largest possible audience. In 2023, roughly 5 billion dollars will be spent on influencer marketing campaigns in the US alone (Enberg, 2022), and estimates suggest

influencer marketing spend will top 30 billion dollars world-wide (PQ Media, 2023). Previous research (e.g., Morton, 2020; Valsesia & Diehl, 2022) has identified various factors that influence social connection. In a qualitative analysis, Morton (2020) finds that young adults tend to follow social media influencers who are self-confident, genuine, and optimistic. The author also finds young adults are motivated to follow influencers for several reasons, including: information, inspiration, and humor. A study by Valsesia and Diehl (2022) shows that content creators posting on Twitter about material (vs. experiential) purchases garner lower WTC (intentions to follow, like, and retweet) due to consumers' less favorable impressions. Our findings on the bad-influencer effect offer new, critical insights for content creators and marketing managers, emphasizing the effect of a poster's apparent indulgence (vs. self-control) in goal domains valued by consumers on those consumers' willingness to form a social connection with the poster.

Practical implications

Our research provides actionable insights for brand managers and influencers to help enhance customer engagement. We synthesize these insights into five "strategic phases," corresponding to their timeline of implementation (see Table 2). In the first strategic phase, Preselection Strategy, both brand managers and influencers should learn the nuances of consumer goal pursuit, indulgence, and self-control. Furthermore, brand managers and influencers should learn the factors that affect expectations of interpersonal instrumentality, understanding what it means to be impedimental versus instrumental to another person's goals. Second, in the Research Strategy phase, brand managers and influencers should leverage platform tools (e.g., social media quizzes and polls) to learn their audience's goals, a critical step to effective connection and persuasion. In the third phase, Partnership Strategy, we suggest managers select influencers whose content aligns with the brand's market offerings in terms of the level of indulgence. And, vice versa, influencers should accept brand partnerships that align with the level of indulgence they tend to exhibit in their posts.

During the fourth phase, Messaging and Content Strategy, we advise the curation, tailoring, and production of content that avoids indulgence with respect to the target audience's goals. When indulgent content does get posted, ensuring that the goals of the audience are temporarily suppressed is important. For example, posters could share sequential "stories" or "reels" that first suppress goals (e.g., #YOLO) prior to sharing indulgent content. In the final phase, Monitoring Strategy, we stress the importance of actively adapting to changes in audience goals for a dynamic content strategy and ensuring that both brand and influencer content consistently align with low levels of indulgence.

Future directions

Our research on the bad-influencer effect has revealed the impact of influencers' apparent indulgence or self-control on social connection and marketing outcomes. Building on these findings, we propose four avenues for future research, two of which focus on consumers' well-being in the digital age. First, as consumers are increasingly reliant on digital platforms for information and social interaction, future research might examine the role of digital literacy in the bad-influencer effect. Whether less (vs. more) digitally literate consumers are more susceptible to the influence of strangers online, particularly when it comes to their own goal pursuit, is an unanswered question. Helping less tech-savvy consumers regulate their exposure to content that may impact their valued goals is important for ensuring consumer welfare.

Second, future research could examine whether goal activation (our theoretical moderator) amplifies the effect of target behavior on instrumentality expectations (a-path moderation), or whether it amplifies the effect of instrumentality expectations on social connection (b-path moderation). Research by Fitzsimmons and Shah (2008) seems to suggest that people recognize the interpersonal instrumentality of others, even when the related goal is not active (e.g., participants can identify friends and family members who would be instrumental to a goal, even if the participant is not currently pursuing that goal). In the context of social media, however, it is unclear whether a stranger would be recognized as instrumental to a goal that an observer does not hold or is not actively pursuing. Thus, future research may test these two moderated mediation models to better understand the effects of goal activation on interpersonal judgements and connections.

Third, the central finding from our Supplemental Study 1 (Web Appendix C) is that social media accounts whose posts are deemed more (vs. less) indulgent accrue fewer followers over time, showing how the bad-influencer effect manifests in the field. This study used independent indulgence ratings of 95 social media accounts, shared by Tang et al., (2022) from their Study 5b. In that study, Tang and colleagues examined engagement rates (likes, comments, and shares per follower) for those 95 social media accounts, as a function of their independently rated indulgence level. They found that the *more* (vs. less) indulgent an account was rated, the more engagement it received. This finding differs from ours in that they examined engagement via likes, comments, and shares per follower, whereas we focus on social connection as measured by actual follower count. These seemingly discrepant findings may highlight that different measures of social media engagement (e.g., likes vs. follows) respond differently to indulgence. Currently, most research on social

Table 2 Recommendations (Strategic Phases, Objectives, and Tactics) for brand managers and influencers on applying the bad-influencer effect

Strategic Phase	Main Objective(s)	Tactics
I. Preselection Strategy	**Manager & Influencer Training**	Educate both brand managers and influencers on the nuances of consumer goal pursuit and the social psychology underlying interpersonal instrumentality expectations.
II. Research Strategy	**Learn Audience Goals**	Managers and influecers gain an accurate understanding of their respective audience's goals.
III. Partnership Strategy	**Influencer-Brand Fit**	Select influencers whose content aligns with the brand's product offerings in terms of indulgence or self-control (and vice versa), ensuring a cohesive partnership that resonates with consumers.
	Broad Content Curation Strategy	Generally, content that might be perceived as indulgent or an obstruction to valued audience goals should be minimized.
IV. Messaging and Content Strategy	**Target Audience Alignment**	Brands and influencers should create content that avoids indulgence with respect to the goals of their audience, ensuring the messaging is supportive of (i.e., instrumental to) audience aspirations. When indulgent content is posted, ensure audience goals are temporarily suppressed.
V. Monitoring Strategy	**Tailor Content**	Customize content to align with the varying goals of different audience segments, enhancing relevance and engagement.
	Supportive Content	Craft messages that suggest the influencer is an instrument, rather than an impediment, to the followers' self-control goals, enhancing the perception of support.
	Audience Insights	Actively monitor and adapt to changes in audience goals, maintaining a dynamic and responsive content strategy.
	Partner Oversight	Implement mutual ongoing monitoring of each party's content and produc offerings, ensuring consistency with the agreed-upon (low) level of indulgence.

media influencers treats all forms of engagement as representing the same construct (c.f., Ao et al., 2023; Hughes et al., 2019; Valsesia & Diehl, 2022; Valsesia et al., 2020). Future research might treat different measures of social media engagement as *unique* outcomes, examining for example, when and why the effect of indulgence on liking versus following is similar versus different.

Finally, and relatedly, future research could explore how influencers can balance the need for authenticity with the avoidance of posting indulgent content. For example, Tang et al. (2022) found that people posting about unhealthy (vs. healthy) foods were seen as more authentic, while we found that they are also expected to be less instrumental to observers' own goals. Prior research shows that more authentic influencers garner more engagement (e.g., in the form of likes, shares, comments, and follows; Chung et al., 2023; Tang et al., 2022; Valsesia & Diehl, 2022), while our research suggests that less instrumental influencers will garner less engagement (in the form of follows). Future research might examine how influencers can balance observers' perceptions of their authenticity with expectations of their instrumentality to maximize all forms of consumer engagement (likes, comments, shares, follows, etc.). Future research might also explore when and why posting about self-control is aversive (e.g., a "goody two-shoes" effect).

In light of the expanding influence of content creators on social media and their vital role in sponsored word-of-mouth recommendations, understanding the factors that drive consumer connection has become increasingly important for both content creators aiming to grow their audience and marketing managers seeking to collaborate with them. As marketing managers rely more heavily on social media content creators to promote their products and brands, understanding the implications of online displays of indulgence is essential for maximizing returns on influencer marketing spend.

Data Availability The data and preregistration files for all studies in the manuscript and supplements can be found on Open Science Framework (OSF) at the following links: https://bit.ly/BadInfluencerEffect and https://osf.io/jk862/?view_only=fa1f2f0a2df64af3a6ebf7ef988fd409.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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