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Michaelidou, N, Kostopoulos, I ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3154-900X> and Lowe, E (2025) The dawn of 'deinfluencing' as a vehicle for moral responsibility and anti-consumption. *Journal of Business Research*. 202. p. 115773. ISSN 0148-2963 (Accepted)

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The dawn of ‘deinfluencing’ as a vehicle for moral responsibility and anti-consumption[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Deinfluencing
Deinfluencers
Moral responsibility
Anti-consumption
Authenticity

ABSTRACT

Deinfluencing reflects a novel practice by a content creator on social media that encourages followers not to buy or to buy less. In this study, we draw on fifteen in-depth interviews with TikTok users to capture their perceptions of deinfluencing, and how it affects their consumption patterns. Our findings show that deinfluencing encompasses authenticity (in the content and content creator, i.e. deinfluencer), it is perceived as a ‘morally responsible practice’ that focuses on social issues and serves as a catalyst for followers in their consumption, empowering them to make more informed choices (e.g., more environmentally friendly choices, alternative product options), while also urging them to consume less. We also find that deinfluencing has positive effects on the self, as it challenges beauty standards and ideals of ‘perfection’, with individuals feeling better and more comfortable in themselves because of deinfluencing content. Our study advances knowledge of deinfluencing and its effects on consumption, while positioning it as a crucial concept in the domain of social media marketing. We also contribute to current debates about the effects of social media content creators on followers.

1. Introduction

In recent years, businesses have increasingly utilized social media influencers (SMIs) to promote products and expand brand reach (Ooi et al., 2023; Reinikainen et al., 2020). Although there has been considerable research in the domain of influencer marketing, a unified definition of SMIs is yet to emerge (Ouvrein et al., 2021). Research posits that SMIs are individuals with large numbers of followers on social media platforms that create and post content (e.g., representing a company or a brand) in exchange for compensation (Campbell & Farrell, 2020) and who exert influence on followers’ attitudes and behaviors (Hudders et al., 2021). Currently, 50 million people worldwide identify as SMIs, while the size of the influencer market was estimated at 24 billion US dollars in 2024, growing from 4.6 billion in 2018 (Statista, 2024). SMIs are often seen as ‘models of consumption habits’ (García-de-Frutos & Estrella-Ramón, 2021), with content originating from SMIs considered by followers as more trustworthy compared to traditional marketing (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

Academic research on SMIs has highlighted some negative sentiments (e.g., Jin & Ryu, 2020; Chae, 2018; Dinh & Lee, 2022; Cheah

et al., 2024; Han & Balabanis, 2024), particularly pertaining to the authenticity of the sponsored content promoted by influencers (Audrezet et al., 2020). Authenticity is very valuable and a key challenge in influencer marketing, as it affects the relationship that SMIs have with their followers, the message acceptance, as well as followers’ purchase intentions; its absence may jeopardize the promoted brand’s reputation (Audrezet et al., 2020; Koles et al., 2024). Importantly, lack of authenticity may be seen as a ‘violation’ on the part of SMIs, because they are expected by followers to share original, trustworthy, and unbiased content (Pradhan et al., 2023; Grguric Cop et al., 2024). SMIs’ roles and responsibilities thus become even more crucial considering that social media influencing has been associated with various negative effects on followers too, such as overconsumption and materialism (Jin & Ryu, 2020); fear of missing out (FOMO) (Mundel et al., 2022; Dinh & Lee, 2022); unhealthy parasocial interactions between influencers and their followers (Li et al., 2022); product frauds (Jang et al., 2016); as well as negative effects on well-being (Punnahitanond, 2018; Han & Balabanis, 2024).

In this dynamic social media environment, deinfluencing has recently emerged as a new practice (Karimi 2023; Elhajjar & Itani, 2025)

[☆] This article is part of a special issue entitled: ‘Influencer Implications’ published in Journal of Business Research.

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that encourages people to think critically about their purchases and make better consumer decisions. The practice's popularity is such that by February 2023, the hashtag #deinfluencing had reached over 208 million TikTok views (Greene, 2023). At the same time, since the term's introduction to the public discourse, many SMIs (e.g., Victoria Sola, Michelle Skidelsky) now self-identify as 'deinfluencers' instead of influencers. In contrast to SMIs, deinfluencers often recommend to followers to avoid buying specific products while promoting alternative consumption and a generally minimalistic lifestyle (Singer et al., 2023). This new social media practice differs from traditional influencing, product reviewing, or brand advocacy because it does not primarily focus on specific brands, but rather it discourages followers from overly consuming, urging them to make better consumption choices. In addition, and in contrast to ethical SMIs, deinfluencers are guided by their sense of responsibility and their aspiration to enable social change, as their practice encourages moral consumption as a broader stance in consumption (i.e., discouraging consumption) (Kılıç & Polat, 2024). On the basis of recently published conceptualizations (Elhajjar & Itani, 2025; Moir, 2025), deinfluencers can be thought as *social media personalities who work to combat the widespread culture of excessive consumerism and overconsumption, which is frequently encouraged by conventional influencers. In contrast to what traditional influencers do, deinfluencers advocate for more socially conscious choices. They often offer criticism of well-known goods, reveal deceptive advertising, and advocate for reduced consumption and more environmentally friendly purchases.*

Although there are a few recent studies examining the practice of deinfluencing (e.g., Kılıç & Polat, 2024; Elhajjar & Itani, 2025; Moir, 2025), knowledge on followers' perceptions of deinfluencing and how it shapes their consumption remains limited. Yet, understanding deinfluencing reflects a research priority, given its likely impact on followers' broader consumption choices (Kılıç & Polat, 2024). Specifically, a comprehensive understanding on how deinfluencing impacts consumers will enhance current knowledge and set the theoretical foundations on the mechanics and implications of this new practice. In response to calls for further research on the topic of deinfluencing (Elhajjar & Itani, 2025), our study fills an important gap in the marketing literature and it is guided by the following research objectives: (RO1) to explore social media followers' perceptions of deinfluencing and deinfluencers; and (RO2) to shed light on the effects of deinfluencing on followers' consumption. In our study, we combine different streams of literature, particularly drawing on role theory (Biddle, 2013) and moral responsibility theory (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998), to explore the concept of deinfluencing, focusing on deinfluencers' roles as 'moral agents' in sharing information with their followers on social media. We also adopt the lens of anti-consumption as it enables us to explore how deinfluencers' moral responsibility role manifests in consumption and anti-consumption practices of followers. We conducted a qualitative study involving in-depth interviews with fifteen participants, drawing on their experiences with deinfluencers and deinfluencing beauty content on TikTok.

Our findings and conclusions contribute to theory and have practical implications. Importantly, limited scholarly research in marketing has looked at the notion of deinfluencing, with a few recent empirical studies focusing on the impact of deinfluencing content on consumers' attitude towards a single brand (e.g., Elhajjar & Itani, 2025) and defining and categorizing deinfluencing travel based on deinfluencers' content on different platforms (e.g., Kılıç & Polat, 2024). We extend existing streams of research on deinfluencing by advancing understanding of followers' perceptions of deinfluencing and its effects on their consumption. Importantly, our study contributes to theory by setting the theoretical boundaries of deinfluencing as a concept in the domain of *marketing*, contextualizing it within role theory, moral responsibility theory, and the anti-consumption literature. By doing this, we offer immense research possibilities for further scholarly work to examine multiple research avenues from varied stakeholder perspectives (e.g., followers/consumers and brands), thus expanding the

boundaries of marketing knowledge in the domain of social media influencer marketing. Additionally, we also offer novel knowledge from our results that helps us to understand deinfluencing as a marketing concept, as well as its effects on consumption.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social media influencers' roles in society

Role theory illustrates how individuals act in social settings according to the roles they play (Biddle, 1986). Specifically, role theory explains the link between social structure and individual behavior. It suggests that people live under a set of expectations in intricate social systems, which give rise to roles that correspond with social positions (Biddle, 2013). A very crucial parameter that determines how people respond to specific situations is role conflict, as individuals find it challenging to fulfill the expectations of many roles, especially if these roles are contradictory (Biddle, 1986). Implementing role theory to understand how SMIs make decisions, Grguric Cop et al. (2024) have recently proposed that SMIs are required to play three different, and often conflicting, roles: a business partner for the brands they represent, a reliable source to their followers, and a role model for society. SMIs who prioritize the first role over the other two can sometimes find themselves making unethical decisions and implementing immoral practices such as withholding negative experiences, promoting products without genuine experience, promoting harmful products, and showing a lack of empathy towards their followers (Leban, 2022). On the contrary, influencers that focus on one or both of the other two roles provide their audiences with authentic content about brands, they share honest product experiences, and at the same time attempt to adhere to social norms, add to public conversations, and educate followers (Grguric Cop et al., 2024).

Using role theory as our paradigm in the present study, we argue that some social media personalities can go one step further in their roles, enacting a new role, that of the deinfluencer. Individuals who choose to become deinfluencers enact the role of the 'moral role model,' prioritizing their responsibility towards society over representing specific brands or informing their followers about specific products and brands (Singer et al., 2023). To this end, deinfluencers focus primarily on the social impact of their messages as opposed to their commitment to specific client brands. Deinfluencers' motives and behavior can be explained through moral responsibility theory (Pradhan, 2021), as most of them are motivated by a sense of moral duty to focus on the societal expectations of responsibility in their role.

2.2. The moral responsibility role of deinfluencers

The theory of moral responsibility originates from the works of early 20th-century philosophers and has been employed to explain why individuals act ethically, or not, in various situations (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998). As outlined by the theory, the notion of moral responsibility considers both internal (or self-evaluative) responses –from the individual and outward- as well as external, societal reactions (Baddorf, 2016). In some cases, therefore, individuals are recognized as moral agents when society holds them morally accountable for engaging in an action willingly, with the understanding of the potential consequences and reactions it might elicit from society (Fischer, 1986). These reactions often reflect instances of moral praising or blaming, albeit there are times when they are neither commendable nor blameworthy (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998). In other instances, according to the theory, individuals may also react with either self-praise or self-blame when they are seen to be morally responsible for their own behavior or when they take moral responsibility for actions that are good or morally proper retrospectively (Frankfurt, 1969). For instance, when thinking back on a previous decision, a person could experience feelings of pride or self-satisfaction for choosing the "right thing to do," even if no one

else saw it. On the other hand, individuals could feel guilty or self-reproach for doing something that, in retrospect, they realize was immoral (Baddorf, 2017). This introspective component of moral responsibility is essential because it highlights the need for people to critically assess their own behavior, considering internal moral norms in addition to reacting to opinions from others (Frankfurt, 1969).

When it comes to consumer decision-making, morally responsible consumption is the deliberate and conscious decision to base specific purchasing decisions on moral and personal convictions (Devinney et al., 2006). Through the lens of moral responsibility theory, responsible consumers make choices that maximize the long-term positive effects on society and minimize or eradicate any negative ones (Mohr et al., 2001). These consumers are morally conscious, as they actively seek out products from businesses that benefit society while refraining from purchasing goods from those that do damage (Windsor, 2017). In a similar manner, morally responsible consumers are more likely to accept information and advice about products, companies, and brands from people that they consider morally responsible (Pradhan, 2021).

For SMIs, the way they are perceived by their audiences and society plays a crucial role in the way they behave (Leban et al., 2021; Vulkko, 2021). It is therefore unsurprising that in recent years, many SMIs have chosen to follow a more morally responsible approach, discouraging their followers from buying products they don't need, thus becoming deinfluencers (García-de-Frutos & Estrella-Ramón, 2021). As Rathjens et al. (2024) note, deinfluencers have the power to influence consumers into changing their behaviors, encouraging less and more socially conscious consumption. Choosing to become a deinfluencer is frequently motivated by a sense of moral obligation and the realization of the consequences of one's actions, as opposed to the desire to have financial compensation or expand their follower base. Thus, by becoming deinfluencers, social media personalities enact a more socially responsible role; they advocate critical thinking and thoughtful decision-making. In the present paper, we argue that this power derives from deinfluencers' utilization of consumer's moral responsibility, i.e., the extent to which they "*believe that another individual or group is blameworthy and ought to be accountable for violating standards of conduct by either behaving in an unacceptable manner or failing to behave in an acceptable manner.*" (Wisneski et al., 2016, p. 2). As deinfluencers identify the brands their followers should not trust and/or avoid, consumers develop negative attitudes against these brands and hold them accountable for what they consider immoral or unacceptable practices. Deinfluencers' appeal to the moral responsibility compass of followers is, many times, apparent through the content they create that links specific consumption patterns to unethical or societally harmful behaviors (Lučić & Uzelac, 2023). Contrary to traditional influencers, therefore, deinfluencers are not driven by extrinsic motivations (e.g., fame, income) but merely by their desire to have a positive impact on society, as a whole.

2.3. Deinfluencing and anti-consumption

To further understand deinfluencing and its effects on social media followers' consumption, we consider the literature on anti-consumption. Anti-consumption opposes the culture of excessive consumerism prevalent globally. It is defined as the "*resistance to, distaste of, or even resentment or rejection of consumption*" (Zavestoski, 2002, p. 121), and it entails activities such as reducing consumption, boycotting, self-producing, and many others (Basci, 2014). In the past two decades, research has approached anti-consumption from different angles, focusing on consumer resistance, green/sustainable consumption, voluntary simplicity, and/or ethical/moral consumption (Makri et al., 2020).

Although early studies disagree on whether the rise of anti-consumption represents a temporary trend or whether it signals a permanent shift in consumers' attitudes towards consumption, recent studies agree that anti-consumption is now a global phenomenon that has come here to stay (Lee et al., 2020). Historically, there has never

been a unified model of anti-consumption among consumers; instead, there is a variety of alternative models of anti-consumption, based on environmental and/or personal or political reasons (Iyer & Muncy, 2009). However, most studies on anti-consumption examine the phenomenon as one that encourages a general reduction of consumption (Lee et al., 2009), with anti-consumption activities many times aimed at specific brands, companies, and SMIs (Pradhan et al., 2022; Audrezet et al., 2020; Odoom et al., 2019), such as deliberately keeping away, rejecting, and unfollowing the brand and influencers, respectively (Pradhan et al., 2022).

This selective approach in reducing consumption is sometimes rooted in the incidental bad reputation specific companies and influencers have acquired due to a crisis, although it can also be based on consumers' general desire to distinguish between bad and good brands and actively choose the latter. From a voluntary simplicity perspective, individuals who form anti-consumption attitudes choose a lifestyle that minimizes needless consumption while prioritizing other sources of happiness and fulfillment (Kuanr et al., 2020). The reasons for this choice can be environmental, spiritual, and/or self-oriented (Craig-Lees & Hill, 2002).

Following a slightly different approach, early studies on the origins of anti-consumption distinguish between proactive (internally driven) and reactive (externally driven) anti-consumption (Lee et al., 2009). Proactive anti-consumption involves a deliberate and conscious effort to resist the temptations of consumerism (Wilson et al., 2022). Conversely, reactive anti-consumption is the result of outside influences like market interactions, economic downturns, or advertising campaigns (Albinsson et al., 2010; Atwal et al., 2022). Regardless of the approach followed, it is agreed that one of the main drivers of reactive anti-consumption relates to marketing and public relations campaigns (Lučić & Uzelac, 2023), usually run by non-profit organizations such as Adbusters (e.g., their Buy Nothing Day campaign), companies like Patagonia (e.g., their "Don't Buy This Jacket" Black Friday campaign), and individuals, such as celebrities and politicians (e.g., Jane Fonda's "Red coat – Last piece of clothing I will buy" message). A significant proportion of such campaigns originate from the new phenomenon of deinfluencing (Aw & Agnihotri, 2023). In general, deinfluencers contest the idea that success and happiness are inextricably linked to materialism and external approval. They support critical thinking, self-acceptance, and honesty over material possessions and fancy lifestyles (Singer et al., 2023), aligning with the principles of anti-consumption.

Recent studies have indicated that deinfluencers contribute to anti-consumption aims by offering a critique of "mindless consumption," encouraging resistance to the social and cultural pressures to constantly consume (Moir, 2025). In addition, deinfluencers reject traditional consumer practices and use their platforms to raise awareness about wider social and environmental issues that are also pertinent to the consumption of products (e.g., beauty products). The dissemination of such messages to large audiences (e.g., via social media) suggests that deinfluencers attempt to guide followers to take up anti-consumption behaviors (Elhajjar & Itani, 2025). Additionally, such deinfluencing messages can also be directed to specific brands or to the consumption of product categories (Dislaire, 2024), empowering consumers to reduce their consumption (Balderjahn et al., 2020). According to Kozinets et al. (2021), consumer empowerment consists of six practices, i.e., choice, voice, justice, inclusion, catalysis, and consciousness-raising. Through a variety of content, deinfluencers seek to empower followers into improving aspects of their consumption, for example, providing followers with vital brand information that would lead to better and more informed choices. In a manner akin to how internet review platforms function (Kozinets et al., 2021), deinfluencers also share bad experiences with brands to alert their followers, thus enhancing the justice aspect of empowerment in the process. Empowering consumers is one of the most prominent goals of anti-consumption, since it leads to more environmentally conscious and ethical consumer decisions (Balderjahn et al., 2020). In practice, deinfluencing videos often expose brands'

negative environmental impact, their unethical practices, and/or their deceiving messages, discouraging their followers from buying them. As a result, viewers of deinfluencing videos start to emulate anti-consumption behavior, such as brand avoidance (Odoom et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2009). It becomes apparent, therefore, that deinfluencers serve as agents of ‘anti-consumption,’ as they have a significant impact on their followers’ potential anti-consumption behaviors (Lučić & Uzelac, 2023).

3. Methodology

We followed an interpretivist research approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), conducting in-depth interviews with fifteen SMIs’ followers. Following ethical approval by one of the authors’ institutions, we recruited participants using a convenience sampling method. We initially identified potential participants online (via one of the authors’ social media platforms) and approached them to ask if they were willing to participate in the study. We followed snowballing sampling, asking interviewees for recommendations of further contacts that we could approach. Snowballing is a common method used to identify participants in qualitative research (Kristensen & Ravn, 2015; Zhou et al., 2021; Mehta et al., 2024), and in our case it also served the purpose of the study, as identified participants were able to provide data to address the research objectives, i.e., a purposive sample (Patton, 2002; Guest et al., 2017). We used a set of criteria to screen potential interview participants. Specifically, we required that participants be active users of TikTok, have an interest in beauty content, and engage with and/or follow beauty influencers. Gender and age did not present recruitment criteria in our study. We chose TikTok users as our sampling unit for two reasons. First, deinfluencing as a practice originated from TikTok, and second, at the time when the interviews took place, deinfluencing as a practice was almost solely observed on TikTok (Pearl, 2023). Additionally, it was also important that our participants had an interest in beauty videos on TikTok. Beauty products were chosen as the study’s context because this category is very popular and active on social media in general (García-de-Frutos & Estrella-Ramón, 2021; Michaelidou et al., 2022). Also, at the time of our data collection most deinfluencing videos were about beauty products. In total, we interviewed fourteen women and one man between the ages of 19 and 24, with most of the participants in full-time employment. Interviews were conducted both online (on Zoom) and face-to-face; they lasted between 40 min and 70 min (average time 45.9 min), they were audio recorded, transcribed, and anonymized to protect our participants’ identity. Table 1 shows our participants’ demographic information, including the number of beauty influencers they follow on TikTok and the average time they spend on TikTok daily.

We ceased to collect data when saturation was achieved and “the content domain of the construct has been adequately populated” (Francis

et al., 2010, p. 4). At that stage the interviews were successful in triggering the participants’ experience with deinfluencing, and the data demonstrated adequate *information power* to address the two objectives of our study (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Francis et al., 2010; Malterud et al., 2016; Sim et al., 2018). Additionally, our sample size is within recommended guidelines for qualitative research, meeting both saturation and information power criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Kuzel, 2001; Henning & Kaiser, 2022). An interview protocol (Appendix 1) was used as a flexible guide (e.g., Arsel, 2017), with participants assisted to talk about their experiences and thoughts concerning deinfluencing on TikTok, as well as to share deep insights about how this type of content has shaped aspects of their own consumption. During the encounters with the participants, the interviewer (one of the authors) was mindful to allow the process to unfold, view the discussion’s direction, and ask any additional questions. More specifically, the interviews started by asking some descriptive questions about the participants’ TikTok usage and the beauty influencers they follow. We also asked participants about their familiarity with deinfluencing content and deinfluencers, at what point they became aware of it on TikTok, and what they think it is about. This was an important starting point for us since we aimed at capturing followers’ experience with deinfluencing content. All our participants confirmed that they were familiar with the term “deinfluencing,” that they had been exposed to deinfluencing content on TikTok for at least six months prior to the interviews taking place, and that they were able to describe what they think deinfluencers do.

4. Analysis

To extract our findings, we conducted a thematic analysis using a latent approach. In doing so, we drew on theory (e.g., moral responsibility theory, anti-consumption) to theorize the meanings we derived from our participants, and at the same time considered the research objectives. We analyzed the interviews’ verbatim transcripts following the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). During phase one of the process (data familiarization), one of the authors (the interviewer) familiarized themselves with the data by reading the transcripts multiple times and making notes to derive reflections on the overall narrative. In the second phase, the same author worked through the data in a systematic and evolving manner to identify sections and assign descriptions (e.g., codes). At this stage, and in line with similar research approaches (e.g., Adaramoye, 2022; Saldana, 2013), the researcher used both NVivo and traditional coding to better immerse themselves in the data, to identify codes relevant to the research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This stage generated initial codes capturing distinct meanings in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Clarke & Braun, 2013), which were subsequently reviewed and reduced through multiple rounds of looking at the transcripts, ensuring that the meaning is retained (Miles & Huberman, 1994). At this stage coding presented an

Table 1
Participants’ profile.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation	Number of beauty influencers followed on Tik-Tok	Average time spent on TikTok per day (approximately)
Lara	Female	22	Marketing Assistant	1–10	1–2 h
Taylor	Male	22	Chef	10–20	45 min to 1 h
Matilda	Female	22	Events Coordinator	50+	3 h
Bonnie	Female	19	University Student	30–40	3–4 h
Ruby	Female	24	Waitress	1–10	2,5 h
Sophie	Female	19	Student	10–20	4–6 h
Lizzie	Female	22	Teacher	30–40	30–40 min
Lena	Female	21	Marketing Assistant	30–40	1–2 h
Gabriella	Female	22	Nursery Assistant	10–20	3–4 h
Elle	Female	22	Teaching Assistant	30–40	45 min to 1 h
Lucia	Female	23	Delivery Driver	50+	2–3 h
Talia	Female	20	Horse Wrangler	30–40	2 h
Nadia	Female	21	University Student	1–10	Over 1 h
Saskia	Female	23	Manager	20–30	2–2,5 h
Olga	Female	22	Graphic Designer	1–10	2–3 h

evolving process where codes were split, combined, or renamed as a result of conceptualizing the data, resulting in 18 final codes (see Appendix 2).

In the third phase (searching for themes), codes were combined to identify candidate themes in the dataset to capture patterned meaning that also addressed the research objectives. Tentative themes were formed following suggestions by Braun and Clarke (2022), ensuring that each theme presented a central organizing concept (e.g., summary of a domain-Braun and Clarke, 2019) that reflected meaningful patterns in the data. In the fourth stage (e.g., developing and reviewing themes), all authors were involved in the development and reviewing of the candidate themes, assessing their fit in relation to the research context and maintaining their connection to the research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022). Finally, in stages five and six, the authors focused on the refinement and naming of the themes, with the final write-up following afterwards (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

5. Findings

Prior to capturing participants' perceptions of deinfluencing and deinfluencers and their effects on the consumption of beauty products, we explored what the term "deinfluencing" or "deinfluencers" meant to them, as well as examples of deinfluencing videos. All participants understood that like traditional SMLs, deinfluencers create content on TikTok that provides information about products [(e.g. "people using their platform and their profile to maybe speak about products", and "share their opinion whether good or bad" and "also talk about, they go in depth about products in relation to different things like the environment" (Lucia)]. Participants agreed that deinfluencers do not "push products" (e.g., Taylor/Bonnie) on followers, but on the contrary, they show alternatives and often tell you not to buy. For instance:

"Yes, so the one example I can think of is the brand Laura Mercier, they have this translucent setting powder, and I saw a video about six months ago I think it was, of this girl showing, in the video, this powder and saying like most of you have probably heard of Laura Mercier setting powder. I'm here and I'm not being paid for this by the other brand I'm going to speak of in comparison, but I don't think it's worth the hype.. she went into the reasons why she thought that it wasn't worth the money.. and the one that she compared it to was Rimmel" (Elle).

"Another one that I saw recently was this Urban Decay setting spray and I actually bought it, but deinfluencers are saying it's literally just water like there's literally no point in buying it and obviously all the promotional influencers are saying like it's 20 lb it's amazing you need to buy it; but I've seen opinions online from deinfluencers who have literally said like, don't waste your money, it's not good and, just don't buy it basically" (Matilda).

Overall, almost all participants viewed deinfluencing as "the opposite of influencing", with one participant summarizing it as a "concept that contradicts the idea of constant marketing and advertising of products that influencers get paid for" (Nadia). Relative to traditional influencers, our participants understand that deinfluencers serve a different role (e.g., a more morally responsible role), in creating and promoting [a different type of] content on TikTok, that they are more objective in their reviews while discussing broader social/environmental issues and urging followers to make better choices. For example:

"So I recently started following this girl on TikTok, and basically all her videos are because she rescued a dog that was going to be used for animal testing in China. And since then she's been pushing products that are cruelty-free and exposing brands that aren't cruelty-free yet and products that do use animal testing" (Taylor).

The following part provides a more insightful account of our participants' perceptions of deinfluencing and deinfluencers, and their effects on followers' consumption.

5.1. Themes

Our findings consisted of four themes that capture participants'

perceptions of deinfluencing as well as its effects on their own consumption (Fig. 1). We named our first theme "Authenticity" as it captures views about *genuine content*, and *authentic and honest deinfluencers*. Our second theme, "Morally Responsible Practice", encapsulates participants' broader views about deinfluencing as a practice, while themes three and four capture the effects of deinfluencing on followers' consumption which we name as "Empowered Consumption" and "Effects on the Self". Appendix 2 shows the themes of our study.

Authenticity

Our first theme encapsulates participants' perceptions about deinfluencing content on TikTok and deinfluencers as content creators. Initially TikTok users view deinfluencing beauty content as genuine, characterizing such videos as "completely different from influencing videos", with the latter seen as "just adverts" by participants. For instance:

"They [deinfluencing videos] 're sort of genuine. They're not sort of like heavily edited, made-up videos. They just feel like someone who's just like sharing their experiences rather than like reading from a script" (Taylor).

"When you see deinfluencing videos, it's really nice to see a more light-hearted and authentic content that's a bit leaning more towards what social media used to be before it was just like a place for like brands to market their products" (Lara).

Like Taylor and Lara, the rest of our participants think that deinfluencing beauty videos are more genuine compared to influencing content, and that they reflect the honest opinions of deinfluencers. The authenticity of deinfluencing videos was indeed a prominent narrative in our study, with participants highlighting the importance they attach to the truthful, genuine content that is communicated by deinfluencers. This narrative agrees with evidence from the literature indicating that perceived authenticity (e.g., "true, genuine, or real" Koles et al., 2023) enhances attitudes and purchase behavior towards the connected brand (Reinikaiken et al., 2020; Singer et al., 2023). As noted by many authors, the higher the authenticity of content is, the stronger the relationship between their followers and the promoted brand becomes (e.g., Breves et al., 2019).

Furthermore, and in terms of deinfluencers as content creators, most of our participants agree that deinfluencers are real, empathetic people who "speak the truth," and that they are not money-oriented like traditional influencers and not "controlled" by brands. They indicate that deinfluencers can be trusted because they communicate their honest opinion as opposed to promoting sponsored content. As noted in the literature, the power of deinfluencers derives from their ability to show their independence and produce trustworthy content (Lučić & Uzelac, 2023), thus fulfilling expectations of authenticity in their role towards their stakeholders, in this case their followers (Grguric Cop et al., 2023). In this case, deinfluencers are seen by participants as more authentic than influencers, because in addition to offering genuine beauty content, they show authenticity in *their own selves*, as they seem to care about these issues themselves to share them with their community of followers.

"So definitely like down to earth and like honest. I feel like you can kind of tell when people are being more honest about things, especially how like on a lot of platforms nowadays you have them, like ads that come up when you can tell when people are being paid to promote a product" (Bonnie).

"They actually care about the community [of followers], they care about other people who are watching their videos and they're being honest and saying for example 'oh look that product did break me out' and they don't want people to feel like they're doing it just for like a click of a like button" (Elle).

Morally responsible practice

Our participants' idea that deinfluencers can see the 'bigger picture' in what they do suggests that deinfluencing as a practice largely focuses on social issues and is more grounded on societal expectations (Grguric Cop et al., 2024). Through their experience with deinfluencing videos, they indicated that deinfluencing is a "current," "positive" practice that makes people aware of broader social issues; that it attempts to change

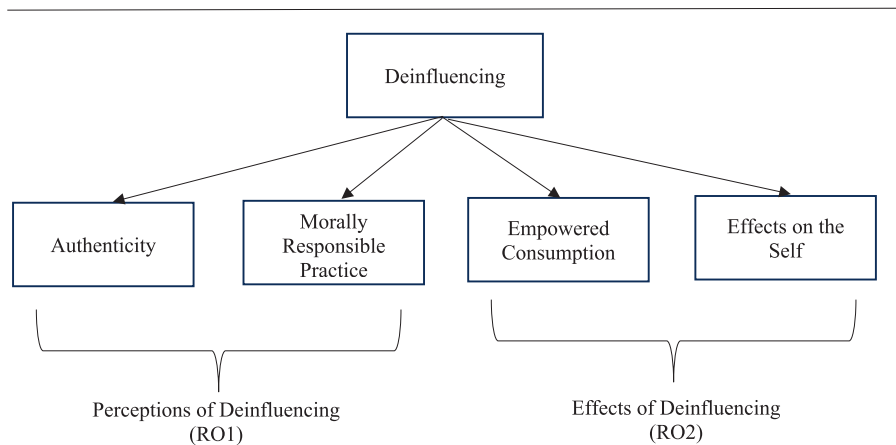


Fig. 1. Perceptions and effects of deinfluencing.

followers' mindsets in terms of what they should prioritize in their consumption practices; and also that it is about what followers themselves should expect from companies in relation to broader societal issues that have traditionally challenged the beauty industry (e.g., environmentally friendly products, animal testing practices, etc.). Two of our participants say (see Appendix 2 for more quotes):

"Deinfluencers manifest within the current economic crisis. They're trying to help you save money, and they're being more relatable, and they're acknowledging things that are happening. It makes you realize what to prioritize. For example, rent, over buying a 50-pound foundation. These deinfluencers are actually more suited to the current times and what's happening" (Matilda).

"It changes like our expectations of companies like when you buy from a company like I said now you want it you're like baseline for what a company should be now is because of this day in age and because of all this stuff being brought up by deinfluencing, it should cruelty free, and workers should be paid properly and often vegan as well. I think it has made think more about what they should buy" (Elle).

Our findings suggest that deinfluencers respond to current social issues, and in their role, they exercise moral responsibility in that they do not only add to current social discourses, but they go beyond traditional roles to *shape* expectations followers should have from beauty companies in terms of social and environmental issues (e.g., how employees should be treated). One participant states:

"I think at the moment it's more about like environmental things just for example I think a lot going around about like Shein how they treat their employees at the moment, so I think Shein has definitely got to listen to that because people are trying to be more ethical. The bigger issues about like the environment are what makes deinfluencing so important because it affects us all doesn't it?" (Talia).

Thus, in contrast to traditional influencers who may feel conflicted in their roles to add to social/public debates because of their commitments to business partners (Grguric Cop et al., 2024), deinfluencers choose to focus on their responsibility "as moral role models" by raising awareness of social issues and urging for changes in followers' mindsets. In this sense, deinfluencing is seen as a morally responsible practice, one that has a greater societal impact (compared to traditional social media influencing), as deinfluencers seem to be motivated by a moral duty, enacting the role of the "moral agent" that appeals to their followers' moral responsibility.

Empowered consumption

This theme focuses on the transition of deinfluencing from a morally responsible practice to becoming a catalyst of empowered consumption. Hence, enacting the perceptions participants have about deinfluencing into effects evident in their consumption—from becoming more knowledgeable about beauty products and alternative options (e.g., smaller brands) to making more socially conscious purchases and/or refusing

consumption of products. According to our findings, deinfluencing content has differential effects on our participants. Our participants mentioned that due to deinfluencing, they are now more informed in their consumption; they have a greater amount of [authentic] information about products and alternative brand options. With this knowledge, they indicate that they feel very positive as individual consumers because they can better "exercise consumption choice" (Kozinets, 2021, p. 430). For example:

"I feel like it's made me feel so much better, I don't feel like I'm being drawn into like these unauthentic videos anymore, and I feel like TikTok is definitely becoming more of a real platform and these deinfluencers are so raw and real that you know; it's showing you to make kind of my own decisions now and I get these opinions from these deinfluencers and now I feel like I can make informative decisions and purchase when its relevant" (Matilda).

We also found that due to their exposure to deinfluencing content, participants are a lot more conscious in their consumption, linking choices of beauty products with broader social issues—aligning with the notion of the *consciousness-raising* element of empowerment (Kozinets et al., 2021). They often choose to reject brands that are not consistent with their own values (e.g., animal-tested products and marketing of harmful products). Saskia recalls that she rejected a specific skincare brand she used to buy after watching a deinfluencing video about the practices of that brand. She mentioned that the reason is that her values do not align with the practices of the brand; she has become more socially conscious, and therefore she chooses to reject it. Most of our participants indicated that they have generally reduced their purchases of beauty products or have even refrained from buying because of deinfluencing. One of our participants states:

"Yes, so as I said, I think...I think I purchase less, because I can think of so many times that I've wanted a product, and I probably would have just bought it. Like, I know I bought so many products in the past before I knew what deinfluencing was" (Lucia).

As highlighted in the literature, deinfluencers advocate critical thinking, environmental consciousness, and honesty over material possessions, aligning themselves with anti-consumption (Lučić & Uzelac, 2023; Rathjens et al., 2024). Our analysis shows that deinfluencing addresses an anti-consumption stance, which serves as a catalyst towards (or against) brands and SMIs (e.g., brand rejection/influencer avoidance) (Lee et al., 2009). In this sense, and in contrast to traditional influencers, deinfluencers act as agents of anti-consumption behaviors, influencing their followers' consumption (Lučić & Uzelac, 2023) and triggering both *proactive* and *reactive* anti-consumption (Lee et al., 2009). In the first instance, followers are encouraged by deinfluencers to question their need for and spending on beauty products (as an internal stance to counter overconsumption), and in the latter, followers react to moral violations on the part of beauty companies. In both cases, the

outcome is to reduce and/or refuse to buy, reflecting anti-consumption behaviors.

Effects on the self

Our participants' individual effects of deinfluencing span across the self, body image, and well-being. These notions reflect problematic aspects of social media influencing, as most often young people tend to compare themselves to SMIs, who are important to their lives (Levesque et al., 2023), leading to negative effects on their self and overall well-being (Jang et al., 2016; Li et al., 2022; Farivar et al., 2022; Nasr et al., 2024). Well-being (e.g., psychological well-being; see Ryff, 2014) was a prominent narrative in our data with participants reflecting that influencers promote unrealistic expectations, indirectly encouraging self-comparisons that lead to negative effects, such as low self-esteem and body-dissatisfaction (Lowe-Calverley & Grieve, 2021; Pedalino & Camerini, 2022). In comparison, they recognize that deinfluencing has more positive effects on them. For instance:

"There is so much toxicity around beauty standards, like body types and physical appearance, that I think in a lot of cases, [de] influencers are genuinely trying to say, like, these products don't actually do that and like more like awareness and positivity around physical appearances" (Nadia).

Our participants stated that deinfluencing has given them a different perspective of beauty. For example, Ruby feels that deinfluencing does not reinforce the "dream of perfection", she thinks that it "gives people more of a reality check" about unrealistic beauty standards. Our participants also mentioned that they feel good about themselves after watching deinfluencing videos, with Lena highlighting its positive effects on younger people:

"it makes me feel better about myself and it makes me feel better about like the younger people; like my younger sister going through TikTok and she's much more of an age than I am right now and I think knowing that she's seeing content like that is really positive for me and knowing that she can see that it's not normal and these photoshopping bodies and the like all these like photoshopped faces and like airbrushed faces" (Lena).

The above quotes reinforce a key issue in current literature discourses about the negative effects of influencer marketing on well-being (Jang et al., 2016). They highlight that deinfluencing is a better practice, one that has positive effects on followers, especially young people whose identity is not yet developed (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022). As our interviewees indicated, deinfluencing in the beauty industry helps to promote realistic body images and relatable role models, which has a positive impact on young followers' self-identity formation and overall well-being (Lowe-Calverley & Grieve, 2021). The need for influencers to act responsibly and safeguard their followers' well-being has been expressed many times in the literature (e.g., Reinikainen et al., 2021); according to our findings, deinfluencing is a very effective practice to accomplish this.

6. Discussion

The aim of our study was to understand social media followers' perceptions of deinfluencing and its effects on their consumption of beauty products. With the theoretical backbone of role theory, moral responsibility, and anti-consumption discourses (e.g., Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; Makri et al., 2020), we uncovered our participants' perceptions of deinfluencers and the content they promote on TikTok. Our approach enabled us to derive insightful reflections about the authenticity of deinfluencing content and deinfluencers as content creators. Deinfluencers are perceived as honest and caring individuals that promote genuine and unbiased content that is not encroached upon by brands.

We also found that, relative to influencing, deinfluencing focuses on social issues and promotes changes in mindsets, with deinfluencers focusing on the bigger picture and exercising moral responsibility in their roles. More specifically, our study reveals that deinfluencing as a moral responsibility practice empowers followers to think critically, make informed purchase decisions (through the provision of relevant information), and be more conscious in their purchases in relation to

social and environmental issues (e.g., Kozinets, 2021). As a result, followers are more independent, and they can exercise more agency in their consumption choices. Additionally, deinfluencers encourage followers to reconsider their consumption patterns (Singer et al., 2023), consciously reducing or refraining from consumption, activities that are consistent with *proactive anti-consumption* (Lee et al., 2009; Wilson et al., 2022; Elhajjar & Itani, 2025). At the same time, deinfluencers share negative experiences with products and brands, holding companies accountable for their actions; enacting in this way the justice aspect of empowerment (Balderjahn et al., 2020; Kozinets et al., 2021), that empowers followers to exhibit *reactive anti-consumption* (Albinsson et al., 2010; Atwal et al., 2022). Deinfluencing also has positive effects on the followers' self. The genuine content that deinfluencers create promotes realistic standards of beauty and shapes participants' perceptions about physical appearance and body image, helping them to be comfortable in themselves.

From the above discussion, it becomes evident that deinfluencers' actions can have a significant impact on their followers' transformation into morally responsible consumers. Based on our findings, deinfluencing is viewed as an authentic and morally responsible practice that empowers ethical consumption and has a positive effect on consumers' well-being. As moral role models, deinfluencers guide followers toward becoming more than just critical consumers; they help them become conscious, socially aware, and empowered individuals that are not driven by overconsumption and materialism, but by their personal and societal values. Followers' behavior shifts, therefore, towards a more conscious, critical, and values-based consumption.

6.1. Theoretical contributions and practical implications

Our work contributes to marketing literature, and specifically social media marketing, in two ways. First and foremost, we study a concept that to date has received limited research attention in the literature (e.g., Kılıç & Polat, 2024; Elhajjar & Itani, 2025). We contextualize deinfluencing using role theory, moral responsibility theory, and anti-consumption literature, identifying its theoretical grounding, thus creating original scholarly knowledge of the topic. Second, we advance understanding of what deinfluencing entails as a concept. Based on our results, we can conclude that deinfluencing encompasses authenticity, while as a practice, it prioritizes society, with deinfluencers enacting moral responsibility in their roles. We also show that deinfluencing is conceptually distinct from both ethical influencing and ethical product reviewing. While some influencers or product reviewers may recommend specific morally responsible brands, deinfluencers focus on encouraging moral consumption altogether. For instance, by discouraging overconsumption, deinfluencers empower their followers in questioning the need for buying specific products, promoting, therefore, a more minimalistic consumption model. Even when they discourage consumers from buying specific products or brands, deinfluencers' focus is on reducing unethical or unnecessary consumption rather than redirecting consumption towards specific brands. Therefore, deinfluencers act as agents of morality and anticonsumption, aiming to transform their followers into morally conscious consumers. Moreover, relative to influencing, it also has positive effects on consumption and the self. Indeed, prior scarce research argues about the harmful effects of SMIs' followers' psychological well-being (e.g., Punnahitanond, 2018; Li et al., 2022). Our study shows that deinfluencing has positive effects on our young participants' body images, esteem, and overall well-being.

Furthermore, our results have practical implications, as we offer new knowledge to deinfluencers on how they are perceived by their potential followers, as well as guidance on how they can enhance the positive influence they have on them. Specifically, following our recommendations, deinfluencers should ensure that they provide authentic information to their followers and empower them to make informed and socially conscious choices. Beauty deinfluencers should be aware of the significant impact they have on their followers' [anti]consumption

practices, as well as their self and well-being, both in terms of forming their self/body image and by promoting realistic beauty ideals. At the same time, marketing practitioners—especially the ones working with beauty brands—should aim to provide genuine, unbiased information about their products on social media, as well as to actively consider the social and environmental impact of their business practices. In their roles, deinfluencers act as agents of anti-consumption, urging consumers to react to moral violations on the part of the companies. It is therefore in the best interest of brands to engage in more socially conscious practices, particularly in relation to society, their workers, and the environment.

Finally, our study has useful implications for influencer marketing in general. Influencers that consider themselves as ethical, they should follow deinfluencers' example and resolve any moral dilemmas and conflicts in their roles (e.g., withholding negative experiences, promotion of products without genuine experience, [Grgurić Čop et al., 2023](#)). In this way, they become agents of moral responsibility that prioritize society and empower their followers' consumption with positive effects on the self and well-being ([Leban, 2022](#)). We recommend that the industry should shift to a more balanced approach in setting objectives and measuring the success of influencer marketing campaigns. Such campaigns should be driven not only by the pursuit of commercial success but also by the desire to do good and encourage socially conscious consumption. To this end, traditional evaluation metrics of influencer marketing, such as engagement rates and sales conversions, may not be as relevant as they used to be. Influencers and brands should consider, therefore, new evaluation metrics that could include the relationship outcomes (e.g., trust, loyalty), brand authenticity, and corporate reputation in general.

6.2. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Our study has specific limitations that offer, however, useful suggestions for future studies. Firstly, we have derived our insights from a

study with a small, homogeneous sample consisting of young, primarily female TikTok users interested in beauty content. As a result, our conclusions cannot be generalized to all consumers. Nevertheless, this restriction creates the possibility for future researchers to explore further the findings of our study using different research approaches with larger samples. Moreover, our study focuses on two main research objectives. Future research should have a broader scope, exploring deinfluencing from the perspective of deinfluencers, shedding light on other aspects of deinfluencing as a practice, including, for example, deinfluencers' motivations, attitudes, and goals, as well as the wider implications of deinfluencing for brands, consumers, and society. Another area that could be the subject of future research is the interplay between deinfluencing messages and traditional influencing strategies. Specifically, it would be interesting to investigate how deinfluencing messages that advocate for specific alternatives (e.g., don't buy specific brands) differ in their impact compared to more general deinfluencing messages (e.g., avoid overconsumption). Finally, future research should explore how deinfluencers are perceived by different cultures and how they may influence their followers' actual consumer behaviors, such as switching to different brands, using other methodological approaches such as experimental research and focus groups. Such methods could also be used to triangulate our findings to ensure that there are no biases (e.g., social desirability bias).

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Nina Michaelidou: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Ioannis Kostopoulos:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Emily Lowe:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Appendix 1:. Interview guide

Activity on TikTok and awareness of deinfluencing

- Roughly how much time do you spend on TikTok each day?
- Roughly how many beauty influencers do you follow on TikTok and why do you follow them?
- Are you familiar with the term 'deinfluencing' or 'deinfluencers'? Who is a 'deinfluencer' in your mind?
- When did you first become aware of the 'deinfluencing' trend on TikTok? What do you think it reflects (trend, phenomenon, fad etc.)

Perceptions about 'deinfluencing' or 'deinfluencers'

- How would you describe the 'deinfluencing' trend on TikTok?
- Could you please share an experience of 'deinfluencing' videos created by beauty influencers on TikTok?
- What do you think about 'deinfluencing' videos created by beauty influencers on TikTok? Are there any aspects of 'deinfluencing' videos that you don't like?
- How do you feel after watching 'deinfluencing' videos on TikTok? Have you found yourself feeling different because of watching a 'deinfluencing' video.
- In your opinion, are 'deinfluencing' videos on TikTok different from other types of influencer content on the platform? Can you elaborate on how they are different?
- In your opinion, what are the important messages that influencers can convey through 'deinfluencing' videos?

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Effects

- What do you think the effects of ‘deinfluencing’ videos are on followers. What about you, personally?
- What do you think your experience with ‘deinfluencing’ content has had on your beauty purchases? And more generally (if any). Can you provide any examples?
- Have you ever been deterred from buying a product after watching a ‘deinfluencing’ video on TikTok? if so, can you provide an example?
- Have you ever discovered an alternative brand or product through ‘deinfluencing’ and purchased it? can you provide an example?
- Do you think ‘deinfluencing’ has any wider implications? (e.g., for society, for beauty industry, beauty standards, health etc.)
- Would you continue to follow ‘deinfluencers’ on TikTok? Would you recommend them to your friends? if so, in what situation and for what reasons?

Appendix 2:. Codes, examples of participants’ quotes and themes

Codes	Examples of Quotes	Themes
• Genuine content • Honest, real people • Unpaid/not controlled by brands • Trust • Caring and empathetic	“It’s [deinfluencing content] just so much more authentic, and it’s not being controlled by a big brand who’s paying you to say a certain line. It’s just, it’s not being controlled, it’s just an opinion, and it’s nice and it’s new to see” (Matilda) “they’re very honest, they’re not looking for like just to make money.. they’re like obviously very loyal to their followers and they show like an honest side and quite empathetic because they know a lot of their followers are just normal people” (Gabriella) “they are more trustworthy because it’s like actually like this is what they use on a daily basis, rather than what their makeup artist uses on them when they’re going out so it’s like that kind of person that you look at and you think oh they’re like me like they’re like you know got some spots and I got this and I think it’s a much more genuine, authentic person (Lena)	Authenticity
• Positive changes in mindset • Current practice with societal focus • Conscious of the environment • Awareness of the bigger picture	“I think it’s creating like a new way of looking at things, having this deinfluencing trend appearing has made a really positive impact and like a more fresh, and up-to-date look of like of how we should view things, because of like the world changing as well with the environment and like using things sustainably” (Lucia) “I think at the moment everyone is so caught up on materialistic things and wanting excessive amount of products which actually isn’t normal, but i can admit too, like traditional influencers make me think it’s normal to need like ten foundations. I like especially when deinfluencers speak about other aspects that should be more important for people to consider, like if a brand and its products aren’t very environmentally friendly” (Bonnie). “I think it’s kind of extended onto the new society of being more self-aware, a little bit more exposing about companies and a bit going back to the environment and climate thing, which I think is just, for me that’s really important” (Olga)	Morally Responsible Practice
• More knowledge • Feeling better in consumption • Informed decisions • Alternative products • Refuse consumption/anti-consumption	I think there’s positive effects of feeling good about, you know, finding out some information about a brand or product, about finding a cheaper alternative to something (Ruby) “I think more now before I buy, I think do I really need this product? am I just following a trend? what’s going to happen to it? is it really necessary that I go and spend?” (Sophie). I feel sort of more informed. I can sort of change my opinion on things that I have been using or have thought about going towards using, it’s sort of like opened my eyes towards different products, I like cheaper alternatives or more like environmentally friendly products” (Taylor)	Empowered consumption
• Feeling better about self • A Reality Check • Beauty Standards and Perfection • Well-being	“If I hadn’t seen videos of people being like it’s nice but it’s really you don’t need to rush the shops, I’d have probably bought it, so it definitely has impacted the way I spend yeah” (Lizzie). “it will make people aware that like first of all it’s not normal to look a certain way you don’t need to buy certain things and like just to try and promote being more comfortable in yourself” (Nadia) “it’s kind of showing that you don’t have to be perfect or look a certain way and it’s showing reality.” (Matilda) I think they can relieve a lot of anxiety that you get from watching traditional influencers, so like when you’re watching traditional influencers, you’re seeing them having like unattainable products or sort of lots of expensive products that like I wouldn’t always be able to afford or be buying all the time, it can sort of make you feel quite bad about yourself” (Taylor)	Effects on the Self

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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