When Social Media Ideals Backfire: How Idealized Digital Standards Undermine Self-Efficacy and Goal Attainability

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Abstract

Consumers increasingly pursue long-term goals in digitally mediated environments, where idealized standards on social media shape how success is defined and evaluated. Although such standards are often assumed to motivate self-improvement, we examine how exposure to idealized digital representations affects motivation during ongoing goal pursuit. Drawing on goal systems and self-regulation theories, we propose that idealized standards function as external goal-regulating systems that inflate perceived distance between one's current state and a desired goal state, undermining self-efficacy and goal attainability. Across five studies, including a large-scale text-mining analysis and four controlled experiments, we show that idealized representations weaken motivation not by increasing perceived effort, but by inflating perceived goal distance and undermining self-efficacy. We further demonstrate that these effects depend on how goals are construed. Activating a performance-oriented mindset amplifies the negative impact of idealized standards, whereas activating a mastery-oriented mindset attenuates it. Finally, we identify a content-design intervention that directly mitigates the motivational costs of idealized standards, showing that emphasizing the means of goal attainment rather than end states preserves motivation despite exposure to idealized goals.

Keywords: Idealized standards; goal pursuit; self-efficacy; perceived attainability; digital environments; self-regulation.

"The trouble is not that we aim too high and miss, but that we aim too high and stop believing we can get there." – Jennifer, Fitness Influencer Follower (Study 1).

1. Introduction

People often pursue long-term goals that promise enduring benefits, such as improving health, increasing fitness, acquiring new skills, or saving money. Increasingly, these goals are pursued in digitally mediated environments, including social media platforms and fitness apps, where online influencers shape how success is defined and how individuals evaluate their own performance relative to others. Because goals and their means of attainment are mentally represented (Kruglanski et al., 2015), repeated exposure to digitally curated standards can meaningfully influence motivation and self-regulation. For example, 44% of Americans report turning to social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube for health, fitness, and diet advice (Forbes, 2019). More broadly, digital platforms have become salient reference points for what it means to be fit, healthy, or successful, as idealized social media standards (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008) are commonly framed as motivating and self-improving.

Yet, while such idealized portrayals might seem to motivate consumer behavior, recent evidence suggests otherwise. Edelblum, Frank, and Palmer (2025) show that extreme attractiveness backfires, reducing influencer relatability, lowering engagement, and negatively affecting self-esteem. While recent research has begun to examine idealized digital figures, especially through the lenses of social comparison (Edelblum et al., 2025) and social cues (Chung, Ding & Kalra, 2023; Shehzala et al., 2024), much less is known about how idealized standards affect individuals' internal motivation during ongoing goal pursuit. This raises the question of how exposure to idealized content affects the way individuals evaluate the

attainability of their own goals and their capacity to make progress toward them, and whether these effects depend on how success is defined and how goals are construed.

Drawing on goal systems (e.g., Kruglanski et al., 2018) and self-regulation theories (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 2001; Fishbach & Dhar, 2005), we propose that idealized digital standards work as external goal-regulating systems, affecting how consumers evaluate their own goals. Specifically, we argue that exposure to idealized standards inflates the perceived gap between one's current state and a desired goal state, which in turn undermines self-efficacy, reducing perceived goal attainability and confidence in one's ability to achieve the goal.

Across five studies, one large-scale text-mining analysis and four controlled experiments, we show that idealized representations weaken motivation not by making goals seem more effortful, but by making them feel unattainable and reducing self-efficacy. We further demonstrate that these effects are amplified under a performance-oriented mindset and when idealized standards emphasize end states (i.e., outcomes) rather than the means of attainment, but attenuated under a mastery-oriented mindset and when standards foreground the journey toward goal achievement.

In doing so, we offer three contributions to the literature. First, in positioning idealized digital standards as external goal-regulating systems, we extend goal systems theory (e.g., Kruglanski et al., 2015; Kruglanski et al., 2018) and self-regulation research (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 2001; Fishbach & Dhar, 2005). Whereas prior work has largely treated idealized body portrayals on social media as stimuli that shape affective responses such as body satisfaction, self-esteem, or self-evaluations (e.g., Tiggemann & Slater, 2013; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016), or engagement outcomes such as liking, following, and perceived relatability (e.g., De Veirman

et al., 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019), we show that idealized standards work as external reference systems that affect how individuals evaluate their own goals.

Second, we conceptualize this process as a sequential self-regulatory mechanism. We argue that exposure to idealized standards inflates the perceived gap between one's current state and a desired goal state, which in turn undermines self-efficacy, reducing perceived goal attainability and perceived competence in achieving the goal. Although self-discrepancy and social comparison theories have extensively documented the emotional consequences of upward comparison (e.g., Moreau & Herd, 2010; Chan, 2022), much less was known about how idealized standards affect perceived attainability and self-competence during ongoing goal pursuit.

Third, we advance understanding of when these effects are most likely to occur by identifying psychological and managerial-level boundary conditions. At the psychological level, goal orientation moderates how perceived distance translates into motivational consequences, such that activating a performance-oriented mindset heightens vulnerability to idealized standards, whereas activating a mastery-oriented mindset confers greater resilience. At a practical level, we identify another boundary condition. Shifting idealized standards from end states to means of attainment reliably attenuates their adverse motivational effects.

Managerially, our findings identify a design lever applicable to digital environments. Because marketers and content-creators have limited ability to affect consumers' goal orientations but substantial discretion over how goals are represented, we show that framing goal standards in means-focused terms (emphasizing routines, effort, and concrete strategies) can buffer the motivational costs of exposure to idealized digital standards and promote goal-consistent engagement.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Idealized Digital Standards as External Goal-Regulating Systems

Digital platforms increasingly function as standard-setting environments for goal pursuit. Across social media feeds, apps, and creator ecosystems, consumers are repeatedly exposed to highly curated depictions of what success looks like, often presented as vivid outcomes or exemplary routines (Singh & Sharma, 2022; Feijoo & Vizcaíno-Verdú, 2024). Decades of consumer research show that idealized portrayals can operate as salient comparison standards that affect self-evaluations and aspirations (e.g., Richins, 1991), and more recent work shows that social media intensifies this process by making idealized images frequent, portable, and socially validated (e.g., Tiggemann & Slater, 2013; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Pradhan, Kishore & Gokhale, 2023; see Table 1 for a comprehensive overview). At the practical level, influencer ecosystems further institutionalize these standards by packaging what counts as success into repeatable content formats (e.g., transformations, milestones, "day-in-the-life" routines) that scale as cultural templates for goal striving (e.g., Han & Balabanis, 2024). In short, beyond aesthetic stimuli in the background of consumption, idealized digital standards are often the benchmarks through which consumers interpret what they should want and how well they are doing.

In this sense, goal systems theory implies that the pursuit of one's goals is regulated by personal desires and by the standards and structures that define goal-relevant meaning. This theory conceptualizes goals as cognitive networks linking valued end-states to means of attainment, with behavior guided by how these means–ends relations are represented and activated in context (Kruglanski et al., 2002). Consumer research adopting this perspective

shows that marketplace cues can activate goal representations, shift which ends feel focal, and alter which means feel appropriate or sufficient (Kopetz et al., 2012). Complementing this view, self-regulation frameworks treat goal pursuit as a feedback process in which people monitor their current state relative to reference values (i.e., standards) that specify “where I am” versus “where I should be” (Heckhausen & Dweck, 1998).

Accordingly, research suggests that goals and aspirations are not pursued in isolation, but are affected by contextual cues that define what success means and how it should be pursued. Identity-based motivation theory, for instance, proposes that identities are highly sensitive to situational cues and carry both self-definitional content and readiness to act and to employ particular procedures (Oyserman, 2009). Importantly, such cues need not be explicit or consciously processed to influence motivation, as subtle environmental signals can also activate identities and affect action-readiness in ways that either facilitate or undermine goal pursuit.

In digital environments, idealized standards embedded in influencer content, advertising, and platform norms can thus function as contextual cues, affecting how individuals interpret their goals and their likelihood of achieving them. Consistent with this view, research on influencer-driven fitness and body-image content shows that idealized portrayals often reinforce narrow standards of success and create discrepancies between personal self-understandings and externally promoted ideals (Feijoo & Vizcaíno-Verdú, 2024)

Study	Context / Domain	Antecedents	Outcomes	Mechanism(s)	Moderator(s)	Core Theoretical Lens	Main Findings
Richins (1991)	Advertising; idealized models	Exposure to idealized advertising images	Self-evaluations; body satisfaction; mood	Upward social comparison	Social comparison tendency	Social Comparison Theory	Idealized advertising images reduce self-evaluations and body satisfaction via upward comparison processes.
Kim et al. (2014)	Exergames; embodied technology	Level of interface embodiment	Energy expenditure; intention to play exergames; exercise intention	Presence; enjoyment	-	Embodied cognition; presence theory	Higher embodiment increases presence and enjoyment, enhancing in-game engagement, but does not increase real-world exercise intention.
Brabazon (2015)	Digital fitness; quantified self	Adoption of self-monitoring technologies	Motivation; behavior change (conceptual)	Self-monitoring; gamification; surveillance (conceptual)	Contextual factors (e.g., social environment)	Quantified self; neoliberal self-governance	Self-tracking technologies may motivate behavior but can also induce self-surveillance and commodification of the body.
Vogel & Rose (2017)	Social networking sites	Exposure to SNS profiles	Interpersonal evaluations of others	Positive self-presentation bias (implied)	-	Self-presentation; social comparison	Viewing SNS profiles inflates perceptions of others' socially desirable traits.
Albinsson et al. (2017)	Fitness services; personal training	Engagement with personal trainer; goal negotiation	Goal maintenance; identity transformation	Intersubjectivity; "moment of release"; self-efficacy appraisal	Motivation type (conceptual)	Goal-striving theory; intersubjectivity	Goal pursuit in fitness is dialectical and co-constructed; surrendering control to experts facilitates persistence.
Sokolova & Perez (2021)	YouTube fitness influencers	Parasocial relationship; influencer attractiveness; credibility; gratifications	Intention to exercise	Attitudes toward videos; intention to watch; attitudes toward fitness	Exercising status; gender	Social Cognitive Theory; Uses & Gratifications; Parasocial Interaction	Watching fitness influencers predicts exercise intention only among those already exercising; parasocial relationships do not directly predict exercise intention.
Durau et al. (2022)	YouTube fitness influencers	Influencer trustworthiness; expertise; attractiveness; user health & fitness variables	Intention to exercise with influencer	Perceived motivating power; attitude toward influencer	Gender; self-reported health; physical fitness; involvement	Source Credibility Model; Social Cognitive Theory; Protection Motivation Theory	Perceived motivating power drives exercise intention; credibility influences motivating power; user fitness and health shape effects.
Singh & Sharma (2022)	Social media; weight-loss disclosure	Goal disclosure on social media	Healthy lifestyle intention	Goal commitment	Guilt vs. shame	Social comparison; goal-directed behavior	Goal disclosure increases healthy lifestyle intentions when guilt (not shame) is elicited by upward comparison.

Study	Context / Domain	Antecedents	Outcomes	Mechanism(s)	Moderator(s)	Core Theoretical Lens	Main Findings
Pradhan et al. (2023)	Influencer marketing (review)	Influencer traits; content characteristics	Engagement; purchase intention; brand attitudes	Trust; identification; parasocial interaction	Product type; congruity; skepticism	Source credibility; self-congruity; social comparison	Influencer research emphasizes persuasion and engagement outcomes and calls for deeper psychological mechanisms.
Couto & Fitts Willoughby (2024)	Instagram fitness posts	Objectification (present vs absent) × Body appreciation messaging (present vs absent)	State & trait body appreciation; self-esteem; self-compassion	None (interaction-based design)	Experimental interaction	Objectification theory; body appreciation framework	Body appreciation captions buffer objectification effects on state body appreciation and self-compassion.
de Brabandere et al. (2025)	TikTok fitfluencers (#Fittok)	Type of fitfluencer content (posing vs workout vs authenticity vs control)	Body satisfaction; workout intention; exercise behavior	Appearance comparison; assimilative vs contrastive feelings; self-efficacy (Study 1)	-	Social Comparison Theory; Selective Accessibility Model	Fitfluencer content increases appearance comparison; contrastive feelings reduce body satisfaction; assimilative feelings increase workout intention; no consistent behavioral effects.
Edelblum (2025)	Fitfluencers; Instagram	Moderate vs. extreme attractiveness	Persuasion effectiveness; exercise intention	Perceived similarity / influencer attainability	Self-esteem	Source attractiveness; social comparison	Extremely attractive fitfluencers can backfire by reducing perceived similarity and persuasion effectiveness.
The Present Work	Social media; fitness goals	Exposure to idealized vs. realistic digital standards	Perceived goal attainability; perceived competence; motivational withdrawal	Perceived goal distance → self-efficacy	Goal orientation (performance/mastery) and means vs. ends framing	Goal-systems theory; self-regulation.	Idealized digital standards increase perceived goal distance, reducing self-efficacy, which in turn undermines perceived goal attainability and self-competence.Effects depend on how goals are represented and pursued.

Table 1. Comprehensive Overview of Prior Research on Idealized Content, Influencers, and Fitness-Related Consumer Outcomes.

From a motivational perspective, these effects can be explained through the architecture of goal systems, which emphasizes that goals are embedded in structured means–end relations that regulate pursuit (Kruglanski et al., 2015). Goals are evaluated both in terms of desirability and availability, structure, and implications of the means associated with them. Prior research has shown that when means are perceived as misaligned with active goals, goal pursuit can narrow, stall, or collapse altogether (Köpetz et al., 2011). In digitally mediated contexts, idealized standards may thus do more than invite comparison or influence affect, as they may shape the perceived structure of goal pursuit itself.

Hence, we conceptualize idealized digital standards as external goal-regulating systems that affect how consumers represent goals and evaluate the attainability of such goals. Because these representations often portray successful end-states and implicitly signal what is required for goal achievement, idealized standards can work as external anchors that consumers use as reference points for their own goals. This logic fits work on externally scaffolded self-regulation, showing that people rely on external agents and cues to support (or sometimes undermine) goal pursuit (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2011), and on evidence that the mere presence of references or symbols that signal goal fulfillment can sometimes undermine goal pursuit (Wilcox et al., 2009).

We propose that idealized digital standards paradoxically undermine goal attainability and one's perceived competence to achieve goals by shifting the reference point against which people evaluate their own progress and prospects. Central to this process is the desirability of the goal and whether such a goal is perceived as attainable. Research argues that individuals are most motivated when goals are perceived as challenging yet feasible, whereas motivation declines when success appears unlikely or beyond reach (Locke & Latham, 2006). This account is consistent with self-regulation frameworks that conceptualize goal pursuit as a discrepancy-

reduction process, in which individuals compare their current state to a reference value (a standard) and use the perceived discrepancy to regulate effort, confidence, and persistence (Carver & Scheier, 1998). In such cases, what matters is not only one's objective progress but also the subjective meaning of the discrepancy. Consumer research similarly shows that motivation hinges on judgments about attainability, particularly early in goal pursuit, when the individual is evaluating the feasibility of reaching the end state (Huang & Zhang, 2011). Because idealized digital standards deliberately elevate and stylize the reference point by portraying extreme physiques or perfect transformations and experiences (Vogel & Rose, 2017; Ki, Park & Kim, 2022), we believe that they can make the same personal state feel farther from the target, weakening perceived attainability and perceived competence to achieve the goal. More formally, we propose:

H1: Exposure to idealized (vs. realistic) digital standards reduces perceived goal attainability and perceived competence to achieve the focal goal.

2.2 How Idealized Digital Standards Amplify Goal Distance and Affect Self-Regulation

Goals are most motivating when they are both desirable and attainable, such that people believe effort can plausibly lead to progress and eventual attainment (Locke & Latham, 2006). Idealized digital standards, we propose, change the reference point of evaluation, which can make the same personal state feel farther from the goal. The reason behind this assumption lies in the fact that idealized portrayals purposefully elevate standards of success (Vogel & Rose, 2017; Ki et al., 2022). When the standard is extreme, the perceived gap between the current and

desired state can expand, even if nothing about the individual's objective circumstances changes (Edelblum et al., 2025).

Accordingly, we propose that idealized (vs. realistic) digital standards undermine goal attainability partly because they change the benchmark used to assess progress and prospects, lowering one's perceived competence in achieving the goal. Evidence shows that people are highly sensitive to such distance-related appraisals, and motivation to goal pursuit depends on whether individuals believe that a goal can be achieved (Huang & Zhang, 2011). Relatedly, goal-gradient literature demonstrates that perceived proximity to a goal increases effort and persistence, whereas perceived distance weakens engagement because attainment seems less imminent and less likely (Kivetz, Urminsky, & Zheng, 2006). Therefore, in setting a reference point that feels farther, idealized standards increase perceived goal distance. Consequently, as the gap between the self and the goal increases, the belief that one can execute the actions required to produce desired outcomes shall also be affected. We argue that when goal distance is inflated by idealized standards, the gap is also more likely to be interpreted as diagnostic of low self-efficacy, because the distance feels larger as well as unbridgeable.

Hence, we also propose that lower self-efficacy is the proximal predictor of reduced goal attainability and perceived competence in goal pursuit. Once self-efficacy is eroded, individuals expect less return on effort, discount the likelihood of success, and disengage from the pursuit (Bandura, 1997; Carver & Scheier, 1998). In goal pursuit, such expectancy-like beliefs are tightly linked to motivation, particularly when individuals are still evaluating whether progress is plausible (Huang & Zhang, 2011). This account clarifies that the effect of idealized standards operates beyond making goals seem more difficult or demanding. The critical shift is structural, because goals come to feel fundamentally unattainable, and self-efficacy declines because the

perceived connection between effort and successful attainment is disrupted. In sum, idealized standards increase perceived goal distance by expanding the perceived discrepancy from the desired end state. Inflated distance then erodes self-efficacy by signaling that progress is unlikely or unbridgeable. Reduced self-efficacy, in turn, lowers perceived goal attainability and perceived competence to achieve the focal goal. Formally,

H2a. Exposure to idealized (vs. realistic) digital standards increases perceived goal distance from the focal goal and decreases self-efficacy.

H2b. The effect of idealized (vs. realistic) digital standards on perceived goal attainability and perceived competence is serially mediated by perceived goal distance and self-efficacy.

2.3 When Do Idealized Standards Undermine Motivation? The Moderating Roles of Goal Orientation and Goal Representation

The impact of external standards on self-regulation usually depends on how individuals construe success and evaluate discrepancies during goal pursuit (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Higgins, 2000). In other words, the same perceived distance may be interpreted as diagnostic of failure or as a natural part of growth, depending on the lens through which goals are pursued. Accordingly, we argue that the demotivating consequences of idealized digital standards are contingent on both how individuals define success (goal orientation) and how success is represented by the standards themselves (goal representation).

Achievement goal theory distinguishes between mastery-oriented goals, which prioritize self-improvement, learning, and personal progress, and performance-oriented goals, which prioritize demonstrating competence relative to others and achieving favorable social evaluation (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Bardach, Oczlon, Pietschnig & Lüftenegger, 2020). Importantly,

beyond determining what outcomes individuals value, goal orientation also affects how they interpret feedback, discrepancies, and standards encountered during goal pursuit (Senko, Hulleman, & Harackiewicz, 2011). As a result, the same external standard can carry different implications depending on whether individuals are oriented toward self-referenced improvement or normative comparison.

Performance-oriented individuals, we propose, are especially vulnerable to idealized standards because such standards heighten distance-based attainability concerns. Performance-oriented individuals define success in relative terms and are therefore highly sensitive to external benchmarks that signal superior achievement (Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001; Bardach et al., 2020). Because performance goals emphasize demonstrating ability, inflated discrepancies are more likely to be interpreted as evidence of insufficient capability. Consistent with this logic, prior research shows that upward comparisons undermine motivation when the comparison target appears unattainable or signals fixed ability differences (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Darnon et al., 2009). This implies that idealized standards should disproportionately increase perceived goal distance among performance-oriented individuals, accelerating the downstream erosion of self-efficacy, perceived attainability, and perceived competence.

In contrast, we propose that mastery-oriented individuals are more resilient because they rely on self-referenced standards and process-based evaluations of progress (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Senko et al., 2011). Because their motivation is grounded in self-referenced improvement rather than normative comparison, idealized standards are more likely to be discounted as irrelevant or informational rather than diagnostic. Prior work suggests that mastery-oriented individuals interpret discrepancies as opportunities for learning rather than as signals of low ability, which buffers them against discouragement in the face of challenging standards (Elliot et

al., 2001; Darnon, Butera, & Harackiewicz, 2007; Senko et al., 2011). Hence, upon exposure to idealized digital standards, a mastery orientation should attenuate the extent to which inflated perceived distance translates into reduced self-efficacy and diminished perceived attainability. Thus, while idealized standards may still be noticed, they are less likely to undermine motivation among individuals whose goal pursuit is anchored in personal progress rather than relative standing (Figure 1).

H3: Goal orientation moderates the sequential indirect effect of idealized (vs. realistic) digital standards on perceived goal attainability and perceived competence via perceived goal distance and self-efficacy, such that the indirect effect is stronger among performance-oriented individuals than among mastery-oriented individuals.

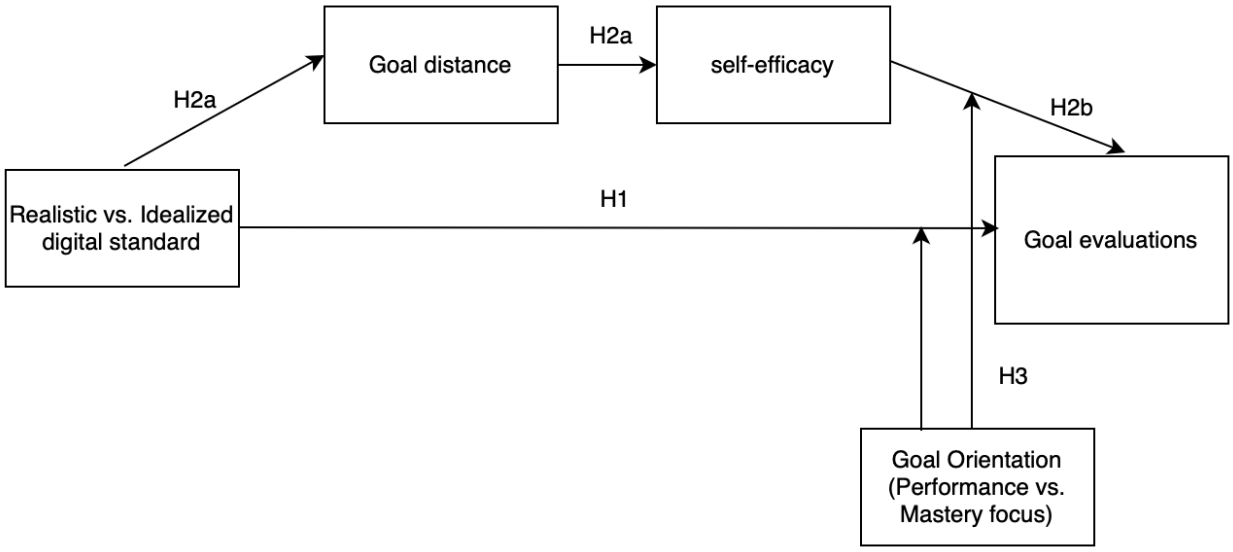

Figure 1. Theoretical Model of Research.

3. Overview of Studies

We examined our hypotheses through five studies, selecting fitness as the context because it involves effort-based, self-regulated goal pursuit, where progress happens over time and standards of success are salient and evaluative. Unlike domains such as fashion or luxury consumption, where outcomes may depend more heavily on access or symbolic signaling, fitness goals are tightly linked to sustained effort, routines, and perceived attainability, which makes them well-suited for examining our effects.

We begin with a large text-mining study using naturally occurring discourse and then move to a sequence of controlled experiments designed to establish causality, test the underlying self-regulatory process, and identify two boundary conditions that speak to both theory and practice. Study 1 provides initial field evidence by analyzing 9,645 YouTube comments posted in response to fitness-related videos. We show that more idealized content is associated with greater disengagement, offering ecological validity for our core claim. Next, studies 2A and 2B then establish causality and test our proposed sequential self-regulatory mechanism. Across both studies, exposure to idealized (vs. realistic) standards reduced perceived goal attainability and perceived competence. These effects were driven by our proposed serial path, such that idealized standards increased perceived goal distance, which then eroded self-efficacy, ultimately lowering goal evaluation (e.g., goal attainability and perceived self-competence).

Study 3 tests the moderating role of individuals' goal orientation. We find that the sequential indirect effect is stronger among more performance-oriented individuals and attenuated among more mastery-oriented individuals, indicating that the same external standard carries different motivational implications depending on how people define their goals. Finally, Study 4 tests a managerial boundary condition that is highly relevant for digital marketers and

content creators. Rather than targeting the cognitive chain directly, Study 4 shows that the way standards are communicated, emphasizing the means (process/steps) versus ends (outcomes), buffers against the behavioral consequences of idealized digital standards. This framing attenuates the negative effects of idealized standards on multiple behavioral engagement outcomes (e.g., effort investment, commitment, willingness to follow).

3.1 Study 1 – Analysis of Naturally Occurring Conversations on Social Media

Study 1 aimed to provide an initial test of our theoretical claims in a field setting by examining how individuals spontaneously respond to idealized versus realistic digital standards in real-world discourse. We analyzed naturally occurring comments posted on YouTube in response to fitness-related content, allowing us to understand whether exposure to idealized digital standards is associated with motivational withdrawal as it unfolds organically in real contexts. Because users commenting on online videos are not situated within a controlled task environment and are not engaged in a focal goal at the moment of expression, we chose to focus on linguistic cues of goal disengagement (i.e., expressions that signal withdrawal, resignation, or perceived unattainability), which prior research identifies as downstream indicators of goal breakdown when goals come to feel out of reach (Wrosch et al., 2003; Kappes & Schattke, 2022). Using large-scale text mining techniques (Boegershausen et al., 2022; Humphreys & Wang, 2018), this study established ecological validity for our core claim that idealized digital standards can undermine motivation.

Data Collection, Cleaning, and Preprocessing. We identified the top twenty fitness-related YouTubers using SocialBlade.com and scraped comments from their twenty most recent

videos ($N = 380$). Non-English, empty, and duplicate comments were removed, and the text was preprocessed using standard Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques, such as tokenization, stopword removal, and lemmatization (NLTK).

Independent Variable: Digital Standard. To minimize subjectivity in classifying video content as either idealized or realistic, we implemented an automated Python-based approach to transcribe the spoken content of each video. We then developed and trained an algorithm to assign each video a continuous content idealization score. This process relied on two word pools, idealized and realistic, build based on prior literature (e.g., Cohen et al., 2017; Vandenbosch et al., 2022). Each pool included both positive and negative terms (e.g., "perfection," "practical," etc). We also included a list of negation terms (e.g., "not," "never") to reverse the score when applicable.

Each comment was initially labeled as idealized, realistic, or neutral based on which word pool (idealized vs. realistic) yielded a higher score. We then trained a machine learning classifier to improve accuracy. Comments labeled as idealized or realistic served as training data, which were split into training and test sets. Text was vectorized using both Count Vectorizer and Term Frequency–Inverse Document Frequency (TF-IDF) techniques. The Count Vectorizer tokenized the text and created a word-frequency matrix for each comment (Suryaningrum, 2023). TF-IDF, by contrast, adjusted these weights by penalizing common terms and emphasizing rarer, more informative ones (Qaiser & Ali, 2018). Specifically, Term Frequency (TF) measured word repetition within a comment, while Inverse Document Frequency (IDF) down-weighted terms frequent across many comments, thereby highlighting more distinctive expressions.

Using the vectorized comments, we trained logistic regression models to classify comments labeled as neutral into either idealized or realistic. The dataset was split 80/20 for

training and testing. After training, comments were categorized accordingly. If the model lacked confidence in its prediction, the comment remained neutral and was excluded from further analysis. This process yielded a final dataset of 9,645 comments. Each video was then assigned a continuous score representing the proportion of idealized content, which served as the independent variable in subsequent analyses.

Dependent Variable. A similar machine learning approach was used to identify cues of goal disengagement in users' discourse. Drawing on prior work (Wrosch et al. 2003; Kappes & Schattke 2022), we created a seed lexicon of goal-distance terms (e.g., "unreachable," "can't," "doable"). A subset of comments was labeled for goal distance and vectorized using TF-IDF. A logistic regression model then classified the remaining comments, yielding a continuous score, where higher values reflected greater perceived psychological distance from one's fitness goal.

Results and Discussions. We ran a multiple linear regression to test whether content idealization predicted goal disengagement, while controlling for the metadata that significantly affected the model (e.g., video likes and view count). The model yielded a significant result ($F(3, 9640) = 10.07$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .003$). As expected, content idealization had a positive and significant effect on goal disengagement ($b = 0.09$, $SE = 0.03$, $t = 2.92$, $p = .004$), indicating that more idealized content was associated with greater levels of disengagement.

Findings from Study 1 provide initial evidence that idealized digital standards are associated with motivational withdrawal. Because this study relies on naturally occurring data and thus cannot establish causality, we now turn to a series of controlled experiments to causally test whether exposure to idealized (vs. realistic) digital standards reduces perceived goal attainability and perceived competence, and to examine the proposed sequential self-regulatory process through which these effects unfold.

3.2 Study 2A – The Effects of Idealized Digital Standards on Goal Evaluation

Study 2A was designed to test whether exposure to idealized digital standards undermines individuals' evaluations of their own goals. We examined whether exposure to an idealized (vs. realistic) fitness influencer reduced perceived goal attainability and perceived competence in pursuing a focal fitness goal. We further aimed to test our proposed sequential self-regulatory mechanism through which idealized standards operate by increasing perceived goal distance, which in turn erodes self-efficacy. The study was preregistered (AsPredicted #260591).

Pretest to Select Stimuli. Before the main study, a pre-registered pretest (AsPredicted #197570) was conducted to select stimuli based on perceived idealization. Twelve fitness transformation photos were sourced from Bored Panda, each showing a "before" and "after" image. Two hundred UK-based male participants (M_{age} = 43.15) recruited via Prolific rated either a "before" or "after" photo on perceived attainability, attractiveness, body similarity, and fitness ideals. The model showing the largest gap between perceived attainability and self-rated fitness was selected (see Appendix, Model 7).

Participants, Design, and Procedures. We posted a Human Intelligence Task (HIT) on CloudResearch (Connect), inviting 200 male participants to participate in this between-subjects experiment manipulating a single factor (digital standard: idealized vs. realistic). One participant was dropped for declining informed consent. Hence, our final sample consisted of 199 males (M_{age} = 47.10, SD = 13.16).

At the outset of the study, participants were prompted to think of a personal fitness goal they would like to pursue and to imagine, in detail, what achieving this goal would look like and how it would feel. Participants were then randomly assigned to view either idealized or realistic fitness-related content. All participants viewed an Instagram post from a male fitness model corresponding to their assigned condition.

Depending on the condition, participants viewed either a realistic or an idealized image of John, a fitness influencer (see Appendix for details). The accompanying description emphasized John's consistency and routine, noting that he typically completed 60-minute daily workouts consisting of approximately 30 minutes of cardio and 30–50 repetitions of bodyweight exercises. To ensure a common understanding of the routine and its accessibility, participants were also shown a visual depiction of the widely used 5BX exercise program, which served to contextualize the type of workouts John followed.

Measures. To assess goal attainability, we adapted three items from Pomaki et al. (2009) and Stamatogiannakis, Chattopadhyay and Chakravarti (2018) (sample item: I feel this body and physique is achievable for me personally; 1 – strongly disagree; 9 – strongly agree, α =.95). Perceived competence was measured using four items adapted from Fiske, Cuddy and Glick (2007) (sample item: I feel competent to achieve my fitness goals; 1 – strongly disagree; 9 – strongly agree, α =.97). Self-efficacy was assessed with three items adapted from Silic and Lowry (2020) (sample item: I am confident that I can perform similar fitness exercises during my workouts; 1 – strongly disagree; 9 – strongly agree, α =.95).

To assess perceived goal distance, we adapted the visual analog scale (Heppen & Ogilvie, 2003), showing two circles—one representing John's fitness level and the other the participant's. Participants rated how distant they felt from achieving their goal based on the overlap between

circles. A manipulation-check question was added to confirm that participants perceived the post as realistic (1) or idealized (9). Finally, we added a series of control variables, including weight, height, perceived body shape, fitness influencer following, exercise frequency, calculated BMI, construal level (Trope & Liberman, 2010), and regulatory focus (Gomez, Borges & Pechmann, 2013)[1]. These covariates were tested and included in the final model if significant.

Results and Discussions. The manipulation check confirmed that the digital standard manipulation was successful. Participants exposed to the idealized fitness content perceived the influencer as more idealized ($M = 7.13$, $SD = 1.56$) than participants exposed to the realistic content ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 2.09$, $t(197) = 8.56$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.22$).

Consistent with our predictions, results from an ANCOVA showed that exposure to idealized fitness content significantly reduced perceived goal attainability relative to realistic content. Participants in the idealized condition reported lower attainability ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 2.43$) than those in the realistic condition ($M = 6.17$, $SD = 2.17$, $F(1, 197) = 26.92$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .121$), even after controlling for age ($F(1, 197) = 46.57$, $p < .001$) and exercise frequency ($F(1, 197) = 24.14$, $p < .001$).

Similarly, participants exposed to idealized content also reported lower perceived competence than those exposed to realistic content ($M_{idealized} = 5.44$, $SD = 2.05$; $M_{realistic} = 6.03$, $SD = 2.05$), $F(1, 197) = 4.01$, $p = .047$, $\eta p^2 = .020$) after controlling for age ($F(1, 197) = 34.75$, $p < .001$) and exercise frequency ($F(1, 197) = 39.08$, $p < .001$).

[1] We ran two additional preregistered experiments to examine the role of construal levels (abstract vs. concrete mindset; AsPredicted #265318), and regulatory focus (promotion vs. prevention; AsPredicted #264489) as boundary conditions. Across both experiments, the interaction between digital standard type and the manipulated moderator was not statistically significant. Importantly, the main effect of digital standard type remained significant and in the predicted direction. These results suggest that our observed effects are independent of construal level and regulatory focus.

Participants exposed to idealized content perceived themselves as significantly farther from achieving their fitness goal than participants exposed to realistic content ($M_{idealized}$ = 32.65, SD = 26.47; $M_{realistic}$ = 43.18, SD = 27.69, $F(1, 197) = 6.15$, $p = .014$, $\eta p^2 = .031$), even after controlling for age ($F(1, 197) = 23.23$, $p < .001$) and exercise frequency ($F(1, 197) = 61.48$, $p < .001$). Finally, the main effect of self-efficacy was also lower following exposure to idealized ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 2.40$) versus realistic content ($M = 5.78$, $SD = 2.30$, $F(1, 197) = 5.48$, $p = .020$, $\eta p^2 = .027$). The effect remained robust when controlling for age ($F(1, 197) = 34.75$, $p < .001$) and exercise frequency ($F(1, 197) = 39.08$, $p < .001$).

To test whether the effect of idealized digital standards on goal attainability operates through our proposed sequential self-regulatory mechanism, we estimated a serial mediation model (PROCESS Model 6; 5,000 bootstrap samples), with the independent variable coded as 0 (realistic) and 1 (idealized), perceived goal distance as the first mediator and self-efficacy as the second mediator, controlling for age. Results confirm that exposure to idealized (vs. realistic) content significantly increased perceived goal distance ($b = -9.75$, $SE = 3.69$, $p = .009$), which in turn negatively predicted self-efficacy ($b = .06$, $SE = .005$, $p < .001$). Greater self-efficacy was positively associated with goal attainability ($b = .61$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$). The direct effect of the digital standard on goal attainability remained significant ($b = -.97$, $SE = .21$, $p < .001$). The sequential indirect effect of digital standards on goal attainability through perceived goal distance and self-efficacy was significant (indirect effect = −.33, 95% CI [−.58, −.09]). In addition, the indirect effect through perceived goal distance alone was significant (indirect effect = −.12, 95% CI [−.30, −.003]), whereas the indirect effect through self-efficacy alone was not (95% CI included zero).

We next tested the sequential mechanism on perceived (PROCESS Model 6; 5,000 bootstrap samples), controlling for age. Exposure to idealized (vs. realistic) content significantly increased perceived goal distance ($b = -9.75$, $SE = 3.69$, $p = .009$), which in turn positively predicted self-efficacy ($b = .06$, $SE = .005$, $p < .001$). Both perceived goal distance ($b = .02$, $SE = .005$, $p < .001$) and self-efficacy ($b = .53$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$) were significant predictors of perceived competence. The direct effect of digital standards on perceived competence was not significant ($b = .07$, $SE = .19$, $p = .69$), and the sequential indirect effect through perceived goal distance and self-efficacy was significant (indirect effect = −.29, 95% CI [−.51, −.07]), as was the indirect effect through perceived goal distance alone (indirect effect = −.20, 95% CI [−.42, −.04]). The indirect effect through self-efficacy alone was not significant.

Study 2A provides causal evidence that idealized digital standards undermine how individuals evaluate their own goals. Exposure to an idealized fitness influencer reduced both perceived goal attainability and perceived competence, even though the described workout routine was identical across conditions and objectively accessible. As we expected, these effects were explained by a sequential self-regulatory mechanism, in which idealized standards increased perceived goal distance, which in turn eroded self-efficacy, ultimately lowering evaluations of goal attainability and competence. These results support our claim that idealized digital standards operate by shifting the reference point against which individuals evaluate goals. When the gap between the current self and the implied standard feels too large, confidence in one's capacity to make progress declines.

3.3 Study 2B – A Conceptual Replication of the Effects of Idealized Digital Standards on Goal Evaluation

Study 2A focused on male participants evaluating a male fitness standard, raising the question of whether the observed effects generalize across gendered goal domains and targets. To address this potential confound and strengthen the robustness of our account, Study 2B replicates the design using female participants exposed to female fitness standards.

Pretest for Stimuli Selection. To select visual stimuli that varied in the degree to which they conveyed idealized versus attainable digital standards, we conducted a pretest using before-and-after transformation photos of female fitness models. The goal of this pretest was to identify stimuli that differed in how strongly they elevated the implied standard of success, particularly in terms of perceived attainability. The pretest followed the same procedure as Study 2A and was preregistered on AsPredicted (#219984).

A total of 203 female participants (M_{age} = 45.46, SD = 13.55) were recruited via Prolific and randomly assigned to evaluate one of seven transformation models. Participants rated the model they viewed on several dimensions using 9-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree), including perceived goal attainability, attractiveness, similarity to their current fitness level, and inspiration to improve. We selected the model that most strongly elevated the standard of success while simultaneously reducing perceived attainability relative to participants' self-assessed fitness (see Appendix, Model 4).

Participants, Design, and Procedures. We invited 200 female participants on CloudResearch (Connect) to participate in this between-subjects experiment, manipulating a single factor (digital standard: idealized vs. realistic). Consistent with our pre-registration procedures (AsPredicted #260683), five participants were eliminated for failing an attention-

check question. Therefore, our final sample consisted of 195 female participants (M_{age} = 45.71, SD = 13.93).

We followed the same protocol as in Study 2A. At the beginning, participants were asked to think of a personal fitness goal they would like to pursue and to imagine what achieving this goal would look like and how it would feel. Then, they viewed an Instagram post from a female fitness model named Sarah, corresponding to either an idealized or realistic standard. We then provided the same exercise routing as in Study 2A.

Measures. Goal attainability (α =.95), perceived competence (α =.98), self-efficacy (α =.96), and perceived goal distance were assessed as in Study 2A. We added a manipulation check, as well as the same series of control variables, including weight, height, perceived body shape, fitness influencer following, exercise frequency, calculated BMI, and construal level (Trope & Liberman, 2010).

Results and Discussions. The manipulation check confirmed that the digital standard manipulation was successful. Participants exposed to the idealized fitness content perceived the influencer's physique as more idealized (M = 7.52, SD = 2.07) than participants exposed to the realistic content (M = 4.84, SD = 2.56, $t(193) = 7.92$, $p < .001$, d = 1.14).

Consistent with our predictions, results from an ANCOVA showed that exposure to idealized digital standards significantly reduced perceived goal attainability relative to realistic standards. Participants in the idealized condition reported lower attainability (M = 4.46, SD = 2.26) than those in the realistic condition (M = 6.04, SD = 2.52, $F(1, 191) = 21.93$, $p < .001$, ηp^2 = .103). This effect remained significant after controlling for age ($F(1, 191) = 19.78$, $p < .001$) and weight ($F(1, 191) = 9.22$, p = .003). Participants exposed to idealized digital standards also reported lower perceived competence (M = 5.28, SD = 2.12) than those exposed to realistic

content (M = 5.86, SD = 2.46), with the ANCOVA revealing a marginally significant result (F(1, 192) = 3.23, p = .074, ηp^2 = .017) after controlling for age (F(1, 192) = 8.54, p = .004).

Also consistent with our theoretical account, participants in the idealized condition reported feeling farther from their goal (M = 31.05, SD = 21.85) than those in the realistic condition (M = 45.16, SD = 30.26), F(1, 189) = 11.43, p < .001, ηp^2 = .057), controlling for age (F(1, 189) = 5.40, p = .021), weight (F(1, 189) = 17.58, p < .001), exercise frequency (F(1, 189) = 19.34, p < .001), and influencer following (F(1, 189) = 6.84, p = .010). In addition, those in the idealized digital standard condition reported lower self-efficacy (M = 4.19, SD = 2.07) than those in the realistic digital standard condition (M = 5.41, SD = 2.79, F(1, 189) = 9.91, p = .002, ηp^2 = .050), even after controlling for age (F(1, 189) = 13.00, p < .001), weight (F(1, 189) = 12.94, p < .001), exercise frequency (F(1, 189) = 12.81, p < .001), and influencer following (F(1, 189) = 7.95, p = .005).

We next tested our sequential mechanism using PROCESS Model 6, with 5,000 bootstrap samples, with digital standard coded as 1 = idealized and 0 = realistic. Exposure to an idealized digital standard significantly increased perceived goal distance relative to a realistic digital standard (b = −14.11, p < .001), which in turn predicted lower self-efficacy (b = .062, p < .001). When both mediators were included, perceived goal distance (b = .013, p = .021) and self-efficacy (b = .660, p < .001) each uniquely predicted goal attainability, and the direct effect of digital standard remained significant (b = −.59, p = .009). Bootstrapping analyses revealed a significant total indirect effect of digital standard on goal attainability (indirect effect = −.99, 95% CI [−1.51, −.47]), driven by the indirect path through perceived goal distance alone (indirect effect = −.18, 95% CI [−.39, −.03]) and, most strongly, as we expected, by the

sequential pathway from perceived goal distance to self-efficacy (indirect effect = −.58, 95% CI [−.91, −.28]). In contrast, the indirect path through self-efficacy alone was not significant.

Finally, we examined whether the effect of digital standards on perceived competence operated through perceived goal distance and self-efficacy (PROCESS Model 6; 5,000 bootstrap samples). Exposure to an idealized digital standard significantly increased perceived goal distance ($b = -14.11$, $p < .001$), which then predicted lower self-efficacy ($b = .062$, $p < .001$). When both mediators were included, perceived goal distance ($b = .016$, $p = .004$) and self-efficacy ($b = .564$, $p < .001$) predicted perceived competence, and the direct effect was no longer significant ($b = .33$, $p = .15$). Bootstrapping analyses show a significant total indirect effect of digital standard on perceived competence (indirect effect = −.92, 95% CI [−1.45, −.44]). This effect was driven by the indirect path through perceived goal distance alone (indirect effect = −.23, 95% CI [−.44, −.06]) and by the sequential pathway from perceived goal distance to self-efficacy (indirect effect = −.49, 95% CI [−.81, −.23]), whereas the indirect path through self-efficacy alone was not significant.

Overall, the pattern of results of Study 2B mirrors those observed in Study 2A, replicating the negative effects of idealized (vs. realistic) digital standards on goal evaluation and the same sequential self-regulatory process via increased perceived goal distance and reduced self-efficacy. Notably, in the female sample, a broader set of covariates (e.g., age, weight, exercise frequency, and following fitness-related accounts) exerted significant influence on the outcomes, suggesting greater heterogeneity in baseline goal-relevant characteristics, but the results remained robust after controlling for these covariates. Next, we turn to testing our proposition that these effects are contingent on individuals' goal orientation, such that the impact

of idealized digital standards differs depending on whether individuals adopt a performance or mastery goal orientation.

3.4 Study 3 – The Moderating Role of Performance and Mastery Goal Orientation

While our earlier studies demonstrated that idealized (vs. realistic) digital standards undermine goal evaluation, Study 3 tests our theorized moderation, examining whether individuals' goal orientation buffers against these negative effects.

Participants, Design, and Procedures. We recruited 400 female participants via Prolific to take part in a 2 (digital standard: idealized vs. realistic) x continuous (goal orientation) between-subjects experiment examining how responses to digital standards depend on individuals' goal orientation. Following our pre-registered protocol (AsPredicted #265316), twelve participants were eliminated for failing an attention-check, resulting in a final sample of 388 female participants (M_{age} = 44.55, SD = 13.28).

Right after our prompt to think of a personal fitness goal they would like to pursue, we measured goal orientation as an individual trait. Participants were informed that people can think about the same goal in different ways. Some individuals focus primarily on personal improvement, learning, and developing their own abilities (mastery orientation), whereas others focus more on outperforming others and demonstrating superior performance (performance orientation). Participants then indicated where their own thinking about improving their body fell on a continuous scale anchored by 1 - I tend to focus more on improving myself, learning, and developing my own abilities, and 7 - I tend to focus more on outperforming others and demonstrating superior performance and shape. Next, participants were randomly assigned to

view digital content corresponding to either an idealized or realistic digital standard, following the same procedure and stimulus structure used in Study 2B.

Measures. As in our prior studies, we measured goal attainability (α =.96), perceived competence (α =.98), self-efficacy (α =.95), and perceived goal. We added a manipulation check, as well as the same series of control variables.

Manipulation checks. Participants exposed to the idealized digital standard perceived the content as significantly more idealized (M = 6.91, SD = 1.79) than those exposed to the realistic digital standard (M = 4.19, SD = 2.10, $t(386) = 13.72$, $p < .001$, d = 1.39), confirming the effectiveness of the manipulation.

Main Effects. As in our prior studies, exposure to idealized (vs. realistic) digital standards significantly reduced perceived goal attainability, so that participants exposed to idealized standards reported lower attainability (M = 5.29, SD = 2.66) than those exposed to realistic standards (M = 6.87, SD = 1.74, $F(1, 384) = 57.81$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .131$), after controlling for age ($F(1, 384) = 25.10$, $p < .001$) and participants' subjective assessment of their own body shape ($F(1, 384) = 82.52$, $p < .001$). Similarly, those exposed to idealized digital standards reported lower perceived competence (M = 6.19, SD = 2.13) than those exposed to realistic standards (M = 6.68, SD = 1.87, $F(1, 384) = 6.19$, $p = .013$, $\eta p^2 = .016$), after controlling for subjective body shape ($F(1, 384) = 111.40$, $p < .001$).

Exposure to idealized (vs. realistic) digital standards also increased perceived goal distance. Participants in the idealized condition perceived themselves as farther from their goal (M = 37.70, SD = 25.80) than those in the realistic condition (M = 50.87, SD = 27.39, $F(1, 384) = 30.99$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .075$), controlling for age ($F(1, 384) = 7.27$, $p = .007$) and subjective body shape ($F(1, 384) = 158.08$, $p < .001$). Finally, those exposed to idealized standards reported

lower self-efficacy (M = 4.59, SD = 1.88) than those exposed to realistic standards (M = 5.24, SD = 1.54, $F(1, 384) = 15.74$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .039$) even when controlling both for age ($F(1, 384) = 13.96$, $p < .001$) and subjective body shape ($F(1, 384) = 89.98$, $p < .001$).

Mediated-Moderation. We next examined whether the effect of digital standards on perceived competence[2] unfolded through a conditional serial process involving goal distance and self-efficacy, depending on individuals' goal orientation. We estimated a moderated serial mediation model (PROCESS Model 88; 95% CI, 5,000 bootstrap samples), with digital standard as the independent variable, goal distance as the first mediator, self-efficacy as the second mediator, goal orientation (mastery vs. performance) as a continuous moderator, and perceived competence as the dependent variable.

Results indicated that exposure to realistic (vs. idealized) digital standards significantly reduced perceived goal distance (b = 13.17, SE = 2.70, $p < .001$). A lower goal distance, in turn, was associated with higher self-efficacy (b = .04, SE = .003, p < .001). Self-efficacy predicted perceived competence (b = 1.26, SE = .25, $p < .001$), and the direct effect of digital standard was not significant. Most importantly, the effect of self-efficacy on competence was moderated by goal orientation (b = −.08, SE = .04, p = .05). Conditional indirect effects analyses revealed a significant moderated serial mediation from digital standard to competence through goal distance and self-efficacy. The index of moderated mediation for the serial pathway was negative and statistically significant (Index = −.036, *BootSE* = .018, 95% CI [−.075, −.002]).

Decomposition of the conditional indirect effects showed that the effect of idealized (vs. realistic) digital standards on competence was stronger at lower levels of mastery orientation

[2]We also tested the moderated mediation on perceived goal attainability. As in our earlier studies, exposure to realistic (vs. idealized) digital standards reduced perceived goal distance, which in turn predicted higher self-efficacy and greater goal attainability, but this serial indirect effect was not moderated by goal orientation.

(i.e., more performance-focused individuals; effect = .41, 95% CI [.23, .61]) and attenuated at higher levels of mastery orientation (effect = .34, 95% CI [.19, .51]). In contrast, indirect effects operating through goal distance alone or self-efficacy alone were not conditionally moderated (Figure 2).

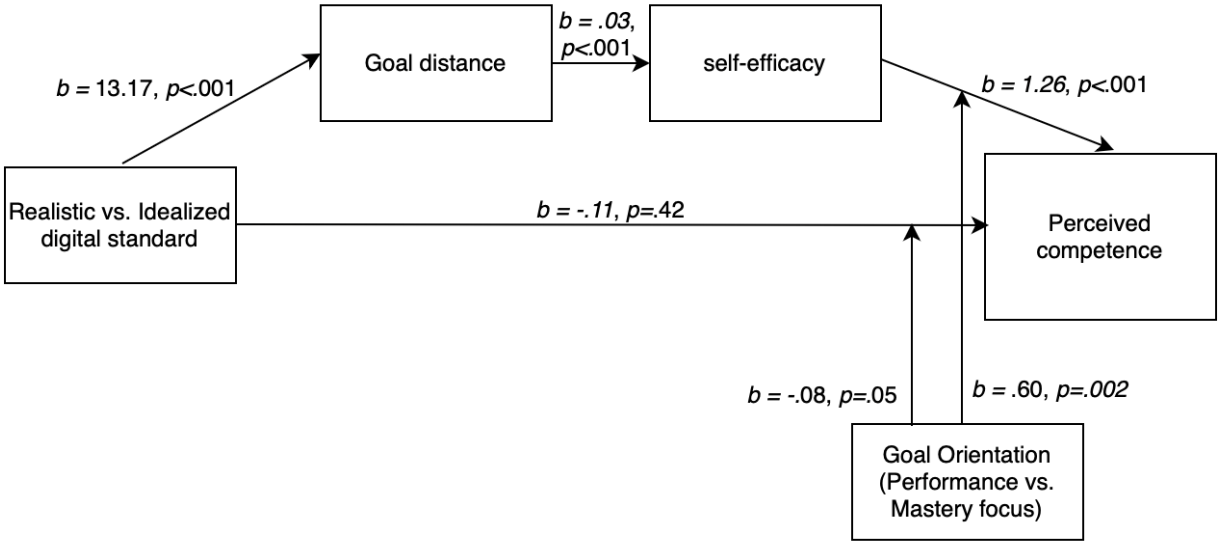

Figure 2. Moderated-mediation of digital standards on perceived competence via goal distance and self-efficacy.

Results from Study 3 provide additional support for the findings of our earlier studies, and consistent with our predictions, goal orientation moderated the sequential indirect effect of digital standards on perceived competence via goal distance and self-efficacy, such that the detrimental effects on perceived competence were stronger among performance-oriented individuals and were attenuated among mastery-oriented individuals. Building on these findings, Study 4 extends our framework by testing an additional boundary condition that speaks to the external validity and practical scope of our proposed effects.

3.5 Study 4 – Emphasizing the Means of Goal Attainability Reduces the Motivational Costs of Idealized Digital Standards

Building on our findings thus far, we now shift our focus to a practical feature of digital content that may similarly buffer against these negative effects. Marketers, influencers, and content creators usually have limited control over consumers' goal orientations but substantial discretion over how goals are represented and communicated. Study 4, therefore, examines whether a practical, content-based boundary condition. That is, how goal standards are framed can mitigate the motivational costs of exposure to idealized digital standards and promote goal-consistent engagement.

Research on action identification and self-regulation suggests that the same goal or standard can be represented in terms of end states (what is ultimately achieved) or means (the concrete actions through which achievement occurs), with important implications for behavior regulation. For instance, representations that emphasize how a goal is pursued anchor behavior in specific procedures and routines, whereas representations that emphasize what is achieved foreground evaluative outcomes (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). Consistent with this view, consumer research on mental simulation shows that process-focused representations, such as imagining the steps and actions involved in goal pursuit, enhance action readiness and engagement relative to outcome-focused representations, because they clarify the path between effort and progress (Escalas & Luce, 2003; Elder & Krishna, 2012). Related work in self-regulation further demonstrates that people persist when goals are translated into implementable

procedures and concrete action cues, which preserve the perceived instrumentality of effort (Gollwitzer, 1999).

Applied to our context, we argue that ends-focused representations, which highlight perfected physiques, transformation outcomes, or milestone achievements, intensify motivational costs by keeping attention on evaluative benchmarks while leaving the route to attainment underspecified. In contrast, means-focused representations, which emphasize routines, effort, and concrete strategies, function as practical scaffolds that redirect attention toward actionable steps. Because this boundary condition operates at the level of content design rather than internal goal evaluation, we predict its effects to emerge in consumer engagement outcomes with the digital content rather than in upstream cognitive appraisals of goal evaluations. Hence, we expect that goal representation might shape the effect of digital standards on behavioral outcomes, such that exposure to idealized (vs. realistic) digital standards can potentially reduce goal-consistent behavioral outcomes more strongly when the standard emphasizes ends (outcomes) rather than means (process or steps).

Participants, Design, and Procedures. We invited 400 male participants from Prolific to take part in a 2 (digital standard: idealized vs. realistic) x 2 (goal representation: means-focused vs. ends-focused) between-subjects experiment, designed to test whether emphasizing means versus end states attenuates the behavioral consequences of exposure to idealized digital standards. Consistent with our pre-registered protocol (AsPredicted # 266722), one participant was dropped for not providing informed consent, and nine were eliminated for failing an attention check, resulting in a final sample of 390 participants (M_{age} = 39.34, SD = 12.46).

Participants initially read a brief introduction describing John as a fitness influencer who shares workout content and everyday healthy habit tips on Instagram. They were then shown a

simulated Instagram post featuring John. The digital standard manipulation varied the influencer's body depiction. Using the same pictures as in Study 2A, in the idealized condition, John displayed a highly muscular and perfected physique. In the realistic condition, he appeared with a more natural and attainable body shape.

Orthogonally, the goal representation manipulation was embedded in the post caption. In the ends-focused condition, the caption emphasized outcomes and final states of fitness (e.g., focusing on reaching an ideal body and end results). In the means-focused condition, the caption emphasized the process of goal pursuit, highlighting concrete steps, routines, and repeated actions involved in improving fitness. The wording of the captions was identical across idealized and realistic conditions, except for the framing of goal pursuit as outcomes versus process (see appendix for further details).

Measures. Following exposure to the Instagram post, participants indicated their responses to a series of statements assessing goal-related behavioral engagement and motivation. Specifically, participants reported their agreement (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree) with the following behavioral items: effort investment (This post motivates me to put effort into exercising), commitment to exercising (this post would help me stay committed to exercising), and likelihood of following the influencer (I would follow the fitness influencer shown in this post). We also added two manipulation-check questions, and collected the same set of control questions as in the earlier studies.

Results. Manipulation checks confirmed the effectiveness of our manipulations. Participants exposed to the means-focused framing perceived the post as emphasizing fitness as a process to a greater extent ($M = 7.39$, $SD = 1.85$) than participants exposed to the ends-focused framing ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 2.90$, $t(388) = -11.80$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.20$), and those exposed to the

idealized digital standard rated the post as more idealized ($M = 7.37$, $SD = 1.37$) than those exposed to the realistic standard condition ($M = 6.02$, $SD = 1.40$, $t(333) = 8.84$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.97$).

Results from an ANCOVA revealed a significant main effect of digital standard on perceived goal attainability (F (1, 385) = 36.70, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .087$), and a significant main effect of goal representation (F (1, 385) = 13.00, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .033$), and a significant interaction between digital standard and goal representation (F (1, 385) = 4.00, $p = .046$, $\eta p^2 = .010$), controlling for whether participants followed a fitness influencer (F (1, 385) = 16.10, $p < .001$). Planned contrasts indicated that when goals emphasized ends, realistic standards ($M = 7.01$) were perceived as more attainable than idealized standards ($M = 5.24$, $p < .0001$). This difference also significant when goals emphasized means ($M_{realistic} = 7.25$ vs. $M_{idealized} = 6.31$, $p = .0015$). In addition, within the idealized digital standard condition, participants reported higher perceived goal attainability when the standard emphasized means ($M = 6.31$) rather than ends ($M = 5.24$, $p < .001$), whereas this difference was not significant within the realistic condition ($p = .42$; Figure 3).

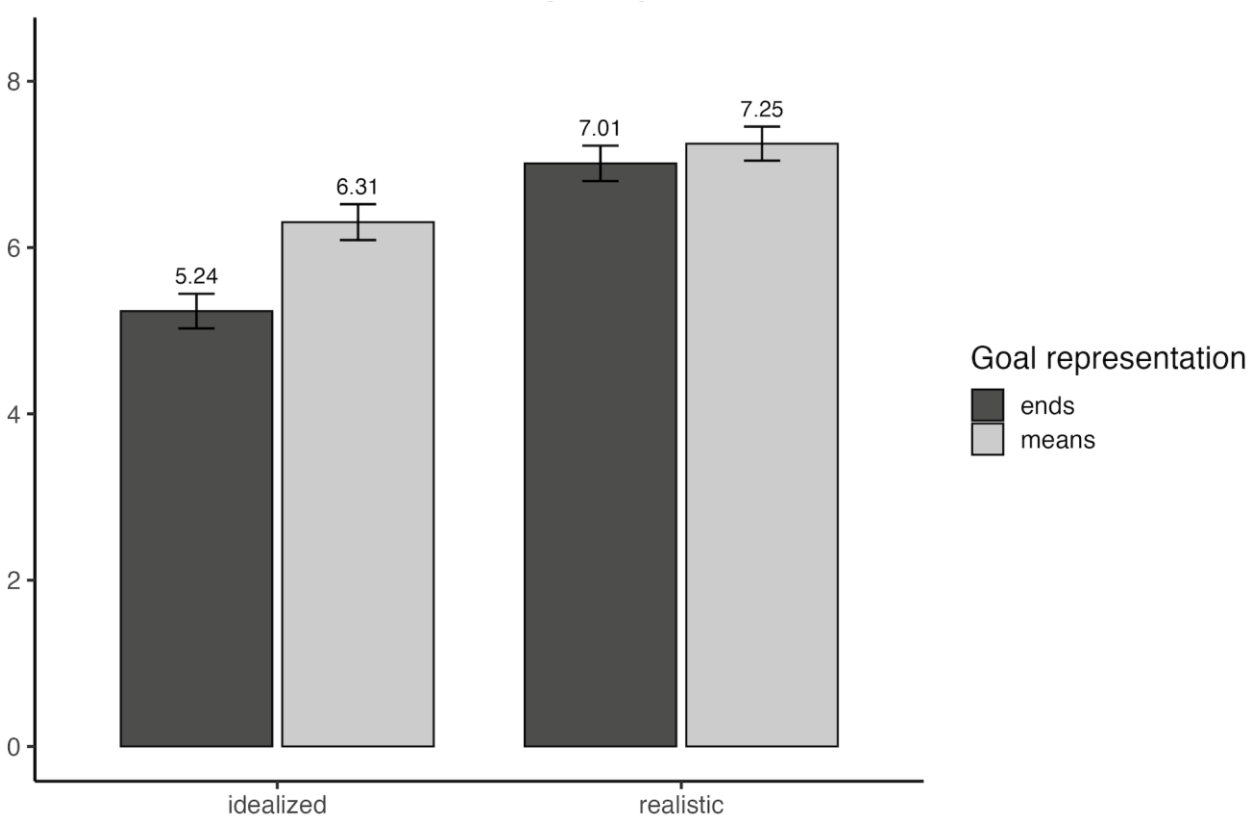

Figure 3. Estimated Marginal Means of Goal Attainability by Experimental Condition.

In addition, results from an ANCOVA revealed a significant main effect of goal representation on effort participants were willing to put into exercising (F (1, 384) = 8.65, p = .004, ηp^2 = .022), and a significant interaction (F (1, 384) = 5.06, p = .025, ηp^2 = .013), controlling for whether participants followed a fitness influencer (F (1, 384) = 38.11, p < .001) and baseline physical activity (F (1, 384) = 3.68, p = .056). As expected, planned contrasts indicated that within the idealized digital standard condition, participants reported higher effort when the standard emphasized means (M = 5.85) rather than ends (M = 4.91, p = .004). No other simple effects were significant (ps > .06), and the difference between means and ends was not significant within the realistic condition (p = .83; Figure 4).

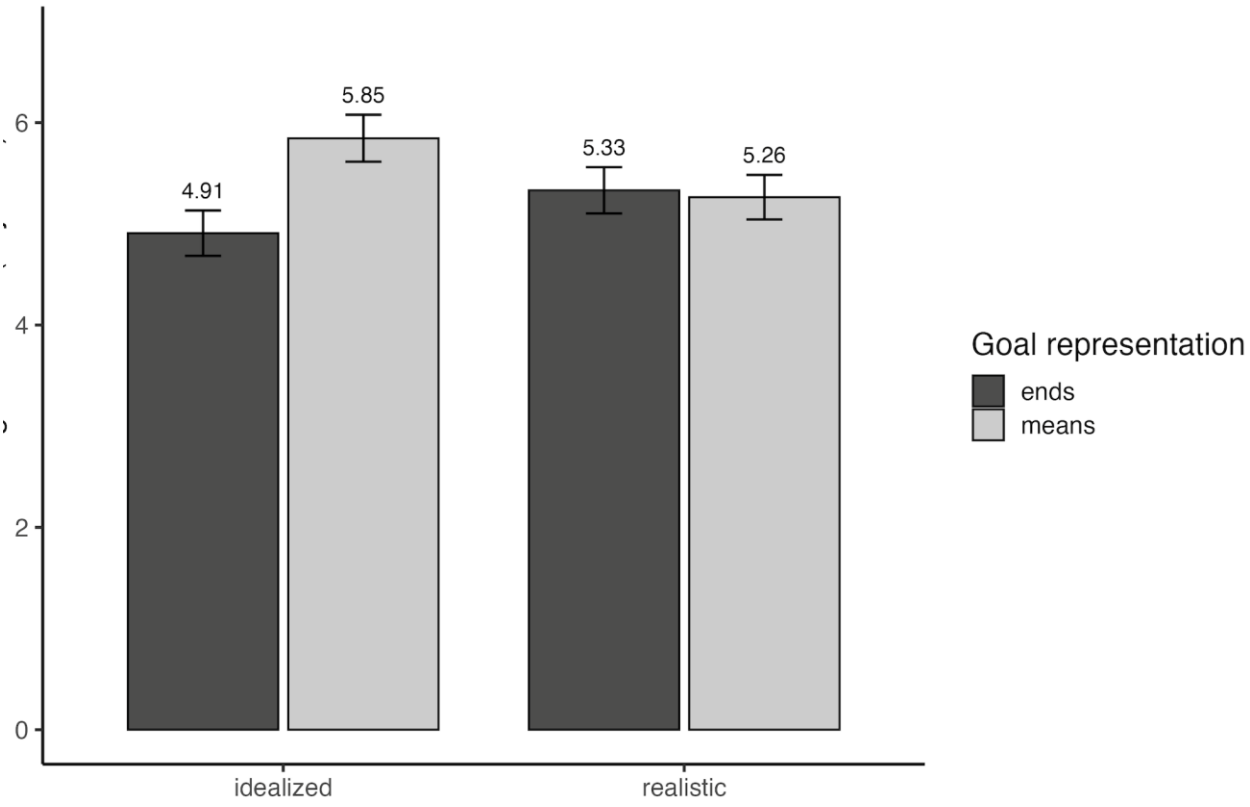

Figure 4. Estimated Marginal Means of Effort Invested in Exercising by Experimental Condition.

We also found a significant main effect of goal representation on commitment to exercising (F (1, 385) = 8.81, p = .003, ηp^2 = .022), a marginally significant main effect of digital standard (F (1, 385) = 3.08, p = .08, ηp^2 = .008) and a significant interaction between digital standard and goal representation (F (1, 385) = 6.72, p = .010, ηp^2 = .017), controlling for whether participants followed a fitness influencer (F (1, 385) = 44.44, p < .001). Planned contrasts show that within the idealized digital standard condition, participants reported higher commitment when the influencer's post emphasized means (M = 5.60) rather than ends (M = 4.63, p = .003; Figure 5).

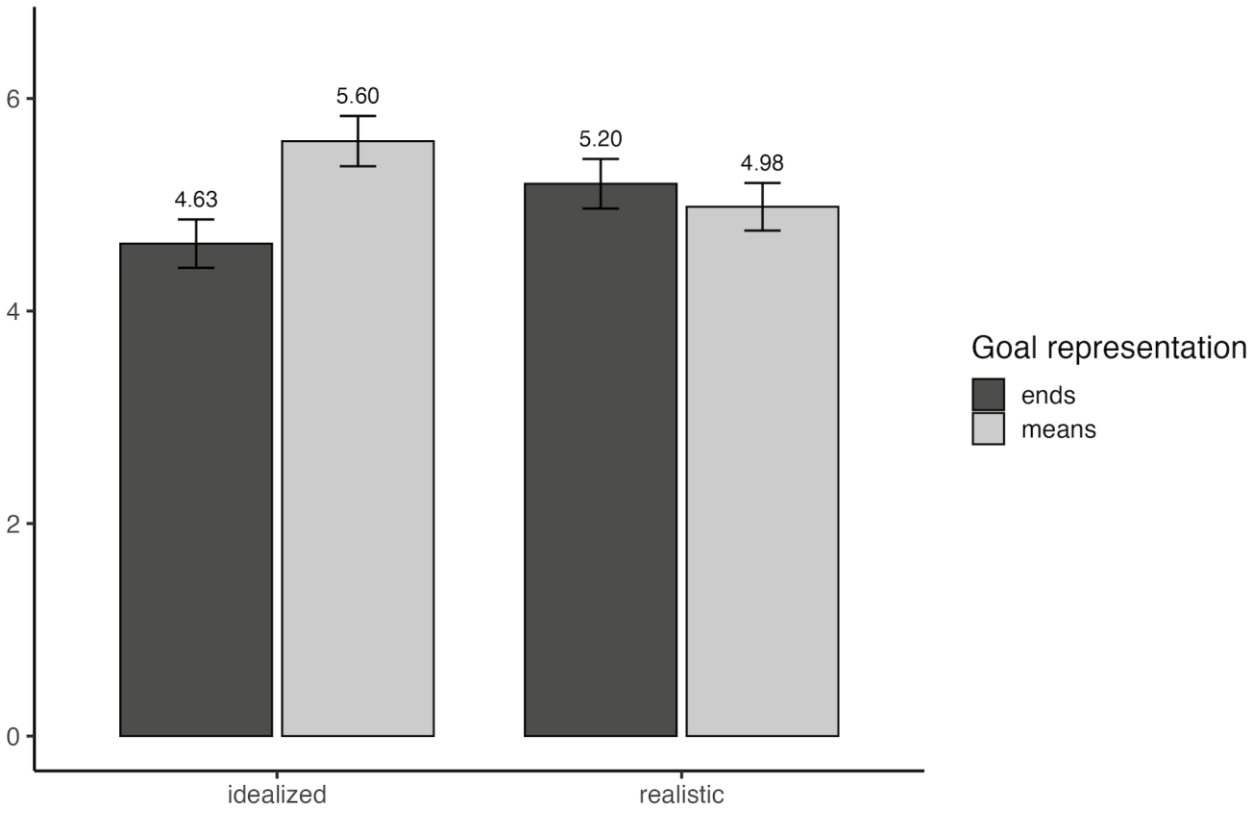

Figure 5. Estimated Marginal Means of Commitment to Exercising by Experimental Condition.

Finally, a significant main effect of goal representation on willingness to follow the influencer (F (1, 385) = 4.86, p = .028, ηp^2 = .013) was found, as well as a significant interaction between digital standard and goal representation (F (1, 385) = 4.30, p = .039, ηp^2 = .011), controlling for whether participants followed a fitness influencer (F (1, 385) = 64.08, p < .001), such that within the idealized digital standard condition, participants reported a greater willingness to follow the influencer when the post emphasized means (M = 5.22) rather than ends (M = 4.46, p = .028), whereas this difference was not significant within the realistic condition (p = .48; Figure 6).

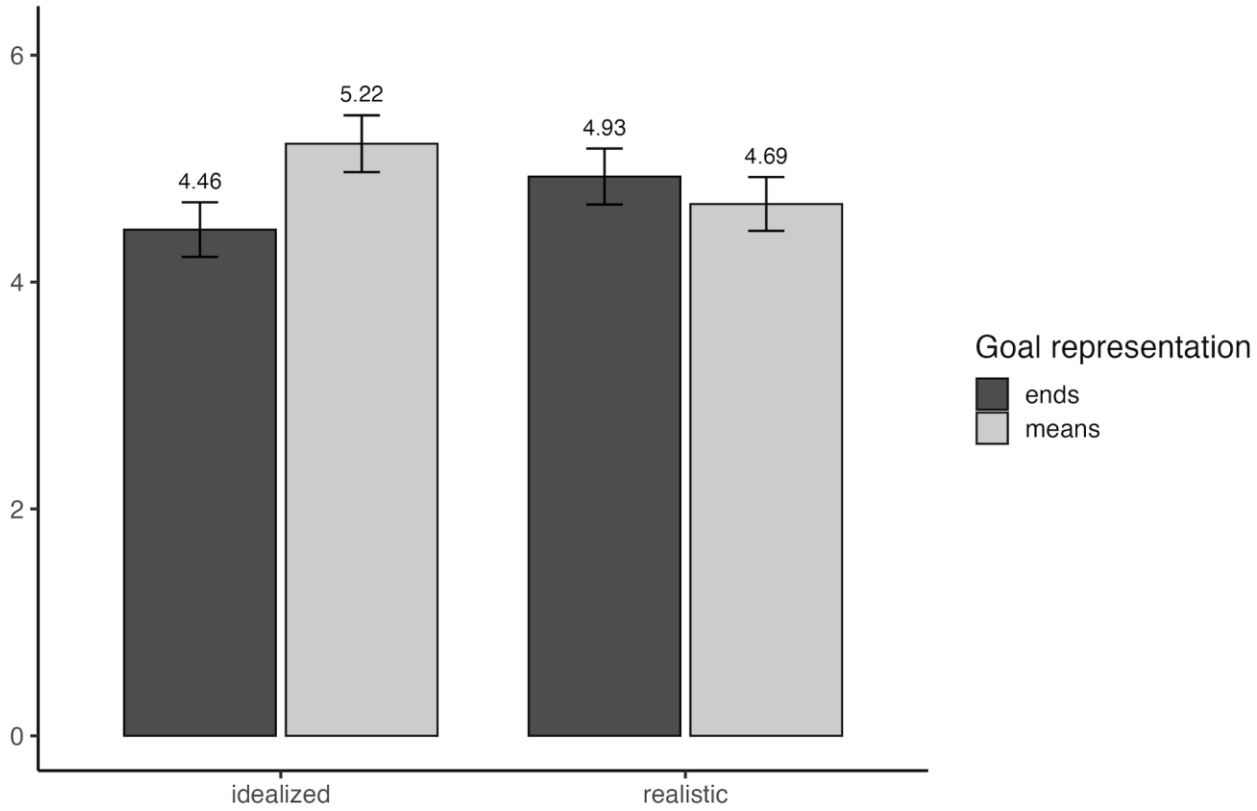

Figure 6. Estimated Marginal Means of Willingness to Follow the Influencer by Experimental Condition.

Study 4 extends our framework and identifies a managerial boundary condition that mitigates the negative costs of idealized digital standards. Whereas our prior studies demonstrated that idealized standards inflate perceived distance and erode self-efficacy, Study 4 shows that how standards are represented also determines whether this demotivation translates into behavioral disengagement. Consistent with our theorizing, emphasizing outcomes amplified the detrimental behavioral consequences of idealized standards, reducing effort investment, commitment to exercising, and willingness to follow the influencer. In contrast, emphasizing the means of goal pursuit attenuated these effects. Importantly, these effects emerged primarily for idealized standards and were negligible under realistic standards, reinforcing our argument that

means-based framing functions as a compensatory scaffold when standards risk appearing psychologically distant.

4. General Discussions

This research advances the view that idealized digital standards regulate goal pursuit by functioning as external reference systems that shape how consumers evaluate how success is mentally represented and how *the* likelihood of successful progress is inferred. Across one field study and four experiments, we find converging evidence for a consistent pattern that exposure to idealized (vs. realistic) standards undermines goal evaluation by shifting the benchmark against which consumers evaluate themselves. When the implied standard is extreme and polished (i.e., idealized), consumers experience their current state as farther from the desired end state, which weakens self-efficacy and, downstream, lowers perceived goal attainability and perceived competence. This sequential mechanism helps explain why content that is ostensibly "inspirational" can backfire during ongoing goal pursuit. We show it inflates the perceived discrepancy and disrupts the perceived link between effort and successful attainment, encouraging disengagement rather than persistence.

Importantly, our findings also clarify when and for whom these effects are most consequential, and how they can be mitigated in practice. We show that performance-oriented individuals, who define success in normative, externally validated terms, are especially vulnerable to the motivational costs of idealized standards, whereas mastery-oriented individuals show greater resilience. Beyond this psychological boundary condition, we identify a practical, managerially actionable lever. Emphasizing the means of attainment (routines, steps, strategies)

rather than ends (perfected outcomes) buffers against motivational collapse in behavioral engagement.

4.1 Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to the literature in three ways. First, we extend goal systems theory (e.g., Kruglanski et al., 2015; Kruglanski et al., 2018) and the self-regulation literature (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 2001; Fishbach & Dhar, 2005) by presenting digital idealized standards as external goal-regulating systems, rather than merely social or aesthetic cues. Prior work has largely treated idealized body portrayals on social media as stimuli that shape affective responses, such as body satisfaction, self-esteem, or self-evaluations (e.g., Tiggemann & Slater, 2013; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016), or engagement outcomes, such as liking, following, and perceived relatability (e.g., De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019). In contrast, we show that idealized standards function as external reference systems that affect how individuals evaluate their own goals. Drawing on goal systems theory and research on externally scaffolded self-regulation (e.g., Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2011; Wilcox, Vallen, Block, & Fitzsimons, 2009), we demonstrate that exposure to idealized body representations affects the perceived structure of goal pursuit itself in terms of what is attainable or realistic. Importantly, this regulatory effect occurs even without direct instruction, feedback, or interpersonal interaction from the fitness influencer. Simply observing such idealized external standards is enough to affect internal goal evaluation, revealing a previously underexplored mechanism through which digital environments shape motivation.

Our results offer a tangential contribution to goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2002), by identifying a boundary condition. Goal-setting theory predicts that difficult goals enhance

effort when individuals believe those goals are attainable and under their control. Our work focuses on contexts where exposure to highly idealized external standards inflates perceived goal distance and undermines perceived attainability. Under these conditions, the motivational benefits of difficulty no longer apply because individuals infer that effort is unlikely to close the gap. Thus, we extend goal-setting theory by specifying when external aspirational standards shift goals from challenging to unreachable.

Second, we identify a sequential self-regulatory mechanism through which idealized digital standards undermine motivation. Exposure to idealized standards first inflates perceived goal distance (i.e., the subjective assessment of how far one is from a desired goal), which in turn erodes self-efficacy by signaling that progress toward the goal is unlikely or unbridgeable. While self-discrepancy and social comparison theories have extensively documented the emotional consequences of upward comparisons (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Higgins, 1987; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Collins, 1996; Moreau & Herd, 2010; Chan, 2022), less is known about how idealized standards affect perceived attainability during ongoing goal pursuit. Integrating goal pursuit theory with self-regulation research on perceived discrepancy and distance (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2010), we show that idealized representations inflate the perceived gap between individuals' current state and their desired goal state, reducing confidence in their own ability to make progress. Our findings further demonstrate that these effects arise not because goals are perceived as more effortful or dlemanding, but because they come to feel unattainable. This distinction advances existing theory by separating effort-based explanations of demotivation from distance-based ones and highlights how external standards can undermine motivation by increasing psychological distance and lowering self-efficacy.

Finally, drawing on research on goal-orientation (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Darnon et al., 2009) and goal representation (e.g., Freitas, Gollwitzer, & Trope, 2004; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987), this research advances understanding of when these effects are most likely to occur by identifying both psychological and practical boundary conditions. At the psychological level, performance-oriented individuals, who define success in terms of relative standing and external validation, are especially vulnerable to idealized standards, as such standards amplify psychological distance and weaken perceived attainability. In contrast, mastery-oriented individuals, who focus on personal improvement and learning, exhibit greater resilience. At a practical level, we show that the consequences of idealized standards also depend on how goals are represented by these standards themselves. When idealized standards emphasize means (i.e., the journey), rather than ends (i.e., the outcome), the negative effects of idealization are attenuated. We thus demonstrate that motivational collapse is not an inevitable consequence of idealization but depends on how individuals construe success and progress.

4.2 Practical Implications

Our findings offer several implications for public policy, consumers, content creators, and digital platforms. First, a common assumption in public health and policy communication is that showcasing highly successful or exemplary outcomes will inspire individuals to emulate desirable behaviors (e.g., extreme fitness transformations, ideal health outcomes). Our findings suggest that when standards are perceived as distant, they may undermine perceived attainability and competence, ultimately discouraging engagement. Thus, well-intentioned campaigns relying on “best-case” exemplars may paradoxically reduce motivation among the very individuals they

aim to help. A more effective policy approach may involve highlighting moderate, process-oriented exemplars that preserve a sense of attainability. For example, emphasizing manageable routines, incremental progress, or illustrating ordinary individuals' sustained efforts at improvement may lead to greater engagement. More broadly, our findings suggest that encouraging a mastery-oriented focus (e.g., emphasizing learning, effort, and improvement rather than social comparison or performance outcomes), can help mitigate the motivational costs of idealized images and standards, whereas performance-oriented framings may exacerbate disengagement when standards feel distant.

In addition, consumers often seek out idealized digital content with the notion that exposure to high standards will be motivating. Our findings suggest that this notion is ineffective because high standards reduce consumers' goal attainability and perceived self-competence to reach the goal. Importantly, this does not mean avoiding aspirational content altogether, but rather, one needs to be mindful of how goals are represented in the content one consumes.

For content creators, a common belief is that portraying highly idealized outcomes is necessary to attract attention and signal credibility, but the results suggest that while idealized content may capture interest, it can also reduce followers' willingness to engage, persist, or perform the behavior, particularly when it emphasizes outcomes over process. We show, however, that content creators may increase long-term engagement and influence by foregrounding means-based representations, such as routines, effort, setbacks, and concrete steps, even when their own outcomes are highly idealized. Emphasizing how progress is achieved, rather than what success looks like, appears to buffer against the motivational costs of idealization. This suggests that structuring content around actionable means of goal attainability may be key to sustaining followers' motivation.

Finally, at the platform level, recommendation algorithms frequently prioritize content that is visually aspirational and outcome-focused, features that often correlate with idealized standards. Our findings suggest that such prioritization may unintentionally amplify motivational disengagement, particularly in domains tied to self-regulation and long-term goal pursuit. As such, digital platforms might benefit from integrating signals beyond immediate engagement metrics.

4.3 Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Our research also has limitations that warrant attention, but open avenues for future research. First, although our studies included content generated from both male and female fitness models and yielded consistent effects across gender, the scope of content tested was limited to prototypical fitness imagery. Social media platforms often feature a broader spectrum of body-related content, ranging from humorous posts and casual selfies to milestone celebrations and performance-driven videos. Future research could explore how different forms of idealization, including those framed around discipline, transformation, or authenticity, also impact perceived goal distance and motivational engagement.

Second, we focused on content-level characteristics (e.g., realistic vs. idealized body content), but user responses are likely influenced by influencer-level attributes. Traits such as perceived credibility and follower count may affect how content is interpreted (Cascio Rizzo et al., 2024). For example, idealized body content from micro-influencers, often perceived as more authentic, may generate stronger self-discrepancy reactions compared to those from celebrity figures. Future work could examine these source-related moderators to further understand the boundary conditions of these effects.

Third, a key insight from Digennaro and Iannaccone (2025) is that digital dualism (i.e., the perceived split between one's real and virtual self) affects younger users. Our findings suggest that this dualism may not dissipate with age but can evolve into a more insidious form (i.e., goal dualism). Adults may no longer seek to change their appearance with filters, but they may still mentally disengage when digital portrayals imply that their desired state is unreachable. In addition, audience-level moderators beyond goal orientation should also be considered. For instance, parasocial relationships, such as one-sided emotional bonds with influencers, may buffer the negative effects of idealized digital standards. Previous research suggests that such connections can promote well-being and foster perceived intimacy (Baek, Bae & Jang, 2013). Future studies could test whether stronger parasocial ties enhance motivational resilience or instead amplify vulnerability by heightening identification with idealized digital standards.

An important boundary of the present research concerns the domain in which idealized standards operate. Our studies focus on fitness, a context characterized by effort-based goal pursuit, gradual improvement, and relatively clear links between actions and outcomes. These features make fitness particularly well-suited for examining how perceived goal distance and motivational feasibility shape responses to idealized versus realistic standards, but future research could explore whether the same self-regulatory mechanism extends to other aspirational domains, such as beauty, fashion, or lifestyle curation, where standards may signal skill development (e.g., makeup expertise or styling competence) but may also differ in the extent to which outcomes are perceived as controllable or effort-dependent. Such work could help clarify the scope conditions of the proposed framework by identifying when idealized standards undermine motivation through perceived unattainability, and when alternative processes may dominate.

Finally, our studies focus on binary gender samples and match gender to control for confounds, increase identification, and isolate the proposed motivational mechanism. As such, the present studies do not allow us to speak directly to responses among non-binary individuals or to cross-gender exposure effects (e.g., men viewing female influencers or vice versa). Therefore, future research could examine potential cross-gender effects in response to idealized versus realistic digital standards. Prior work suggests that gendered ideals operate differently across male and female audiences, with men often aspiring to strength and muscularity and women to thinness or tone (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). Yet, less is known about how individuals respond when exposed to other-gendered ideals, especially in terms of perceived attainability, motivational engagement, and self-regulation. Relatedly, another fruitful avenue for future research would be to investigate how consumers who identify outside the gender binary respond to idealized vs. realistic standards.

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