

# **The Hustle is Real: An Examination of the Self-Related Consequences of Consuming Idealized Self-Promotional Content on LinkedIn.**

## **Purpose**

Everyday users of professional networks such as LinkedIn are flooded by posts presenting the achievements of their connections (e.g. I got a new job/award). The present research takes a self-discrepancy perspective to examine the mixed-emotional and behavioral consequences of viewing such idealized self-promotional content on professional networks.

## **Methodology**

The emotional and behavioral consequences following viewership of idealized self-promotional content on LinkedIn are explored through one pilot study (N = 109) and one online experiment (N = 714), which is evaluated using structural equation modeling.

## **Findings**

Viewership of idealized self-promotional content on professional social networking sites acts as an emotional double-edged sword for LinkedIn users. Users feel both dejection and symhedonia (i.e. happiness for others), dependent on their reported career-based self-discrepancy. We find the experience of symhedonia to be bound by the relational closeness of the poster (acquaintance vs. close friend). Furthermore, we show how resultant emotions drive self-regulatory compensatory IT-use behaviors (i.e. direct resolution, fluid compensation, dissociation, and escapism).

## **Originality**

We offer four distinct contributions. Firstly, we disentangle inconsistent findings of mixed emotions by introducing symhedonia to IT literature. Secondly, we investigate the boundary

condition of relational closeness. Thirdly, we extend our findings by investigating compensatory-consumption behaviors that stem from mixed-affective outcomes. Finally, we do so in the context of professional networks, which are greatly understudied and are distinctive from personal networks. Practical implications are discussed.

### **Keywords**

Professional social networks, LinkedIn, self-discrepancy, dejection, symhedonia, self-regulation

# 1. Introduction

*“My LinkedIn feed is barraged with professionals promoting their latest certification, media citation, job promotion, etc.”* – (Brownlee, 2019), Forbes.

Today, information technology (IT) plays an integral role in identity formation and management (Aw and Chuah, 2021; Schultze, 2014; Whitley et al., 2014). In particular, social media favor the projection of an ideal self to others (Bulgurcu et al., 2018; Krasnova et al., 2015). Highlighting one’s professional achievements is a key dimension of this trend. It manifests constantly on LinkedIn – the world’s most popular professional social network – as standard ‘hustle culture’ inherent in workplaces is brought online and encouraged platform-wide (Ray, 2023; Thigpen, 2021). Micu (2021) likens LinkedIn to going to the gym, stating “There’s a lot of people flexing their muscles” (p. 1). Though much research seeks to understand the strategies and traits of promoters/posters (e.g. Chiang and Suen, 2015), a paucity of research investigates the consequences of idealized self-promotional content on viewers, particularly in professional contexts, although LinkedIn posts frequently attract thousands of views (Barron, 2020). Idealized self-promotional content is here regarded as any content shared on social networking sites (herein SNSs) that represents the poster in an overtly idealized way (Marder et al., 2019).

Prior research – nearly exclusively focusing on Facebook and Instagram – highlights how impactful viewing idealized life depictions of others can be on the mental health of viewers, often generating feelings of anxiety and depression (e.g. Krasnova et al., 2015). For example, viewing fitness models on Instagram decreases one’s body image (Robinson et al., 2017), or viewing friends’ idealized vacation posts leads to feelings of dejection (Marder et al., 2019). Though many studies point to the negative effects of viewership, exceptions arise where

positive effects are found instead. For example, De Vries et al. (2018) demonstrate that viewing idealized selfies can give rise to positive affect. Despite a rich stream of literature in this area, results are varied, and insights about such effects arising in professional SNSs are surprisingly limited (see Meier and Johnson, 2022: for a review). We define professional SNSs as any digital SNS that has the primary aim of establishing and maintaining professional relationships among users (Archer-Brown et al., 2018).

Our paper aims to shed light on the effects experienced by users viewing idealized self-promotional content within LinkedIn. Specifically, our research objective is:

To investigate the emotional responses that emerge from viewing idealized self-promotional posts on professional networks, including under *which* conditions they occur, and *if* and *how* individuals manage these outcomes.

For this, we adopt an alternative, yet complementary theoretical lens to research in this area. Prior related research nearly exclusively focuses on social comparison (i.e. comparing oneself to others) and/or envy in driving subsequent emotion and behaviors (see Meier and Johnson, 2022). In contrast, our theoretical framework, is based on Higgins's (1987) self-discrepancy theory (i.e. self-evaluated perceptions of incongruency between how individuals perceive themselves in actuality vs. how they desire to perceive themselves, which give rise to emotion) and the related theory of self-regulation, the psychological processes individuals engage in to manage emotions (Carver and Scheier, 2001; Mandel et al., 2017). The fundamental distinction between self-discrepancy and social comparison lies in that the former concerns intrapersonal contrasts against one's perceptions of one's actual versus ideal self, while the latter entails interpersonal evaluations of oneself against the perceived attributes of others; the comparison

is oriented inward for self-discrepancies, while outward for social comparison. Adopting a self-discrepancy perspective acts to complement existing social comparison studies providing an overall more holistic understanding of the phenomenon of viewing idealized posts by shifting attention from external (self vs. others) to internal comparison (actual self vs. ideal self). In particular, our framework provides greater scope for understanding mixed emotions that may arise from viewing idealized posts (see Caver and Scheier, 2001; Marder et al., 2019).

Professional SNSs are a well-suited context for our examination for two reasons. First, idealized self-promotional posts are the cornerstone of professional SNSs, known to resemble digital resumes, and are announcement boards for career success (Zide et al., 2014). Second, unlike traditional SNSs in which posted content topics are varied and diverse (Baklanov, 2020; Geyser, 2024), idealized posts on professional SNSs are nearly exclusively within the work domain. This is very important in assessing self-discrepancies, as an individual is likely at any time to internalize multiple discrepancies associated with different domains (e.g. beauty, adventure, belonging, see Mandel et al., 2017); as idealized posts on general SNSs will resonate with different domains for different viewers, examinations of self-discrepancies become very complex. Focusing on professional SNSs reduces noise, allowing us to focus precisely on the work domain, and thus self-discrepancy related to one's career. The work domain is known as an important contributor to life satisfaction and mental health (Lecours et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2011).

Based on the above logic, we focus on professional SNSs (here LinkedIn) to develop a deeper understanding of if and how consumption of idealized content leads to emotion and self-regulatory action. Specifically, we propose that the emotional effects of consumption are shaped by the activation of self-discrepancies (see Marder et al., 2019) and can lead to

engagement in self-regulatory IT-use behaviors as compensatory methods toward reaching a more desirable state of self-perception (Mandel et al., 2017).

Through developing and testing a model for understanding the self-related effects of viewing idealized self-promotional content, we provide four contributions to the IT literature. First - also contributing to literature in the domain of well-being effects of SNSs usage - we help disentangle the inconsistent findings of existing research in the area related to emotion stemming from idealized self-promotional posts. Specifically, responding to Marder et al. (2019)'s call, we find that viewing idealized self-promotional posts on LinkedIn causes mixed emotions (symhedonia and feelings of dejections), which are dependent on the magnitude of the viewers' career-related self-discrepancy. Within this core contribution, we introduce symhedonia (i.e. happiness for others) to the IT literature, which is particularly advantageous when studying mixed emotion given its inherent separability from negative affect, unlike general positive affect (see Royzman and Rozin, 2006). Second, we examine the relational closeness of the poster as a boundary condition, finding that closeness amplifies symhedonia but has a non-significant effect on the feeling of dejection. Third, addressing the lack of knowledge on behaviors that stem from viewing idealized content, we show that both positive and negative emotions drive self-regulatory IT-use behaviors. Lastly, responding to the call from Krasnova et al. (2015), we contribute knowledge to the understudied emergence of emotion and behavior related to viewing user-generated content on professional SNSs, which are recognized to have different norms to personal (or general) SNSs. Beyond contributing scholarly knowledge, the understanding we provide is important to professional SNSs that aim to foster continued usage and address the negative well-being-related effects of user engagement. The timely nature of the latter is evident in broader ongoing debates on the

negative psychological effects of SNS usage and calls for intervention and regulation (RSPH, 2019). Practical implications for IT practitioners are also provided in light of our findings.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. *Self-Discrepancies and Idealized User-Generated Content*

Self-discrepancy theory establishes how emotions (and resultant behaviors) arise due to incongruences between one's current self-state and goal self-state (Higgins, 1987). The theory delineates three types of self-states, namely: the *actual self* (i.e. the attributes that an individual is believed to possess); the *ideal self* (i.e. the attributes that an individual, ideally, would like to possess); and the *ought self* (i.e. the attributes that an individual should possess). The ideal and ought selves act as personally relevant self-directive standards or 'self-guides' for the evaluation and regulation of the actual self (Moretti and Higgins, 1999). The incongruity between two self-states (e.g. actual:ideal, actual:ought) is termed self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987). Generally, self-discrepancies are assumed to represent the situation when the actual self falls below the self-directive standards (i.e. a negative discrepancy). Albeit the case, a discrepancy may occur when the actual exceeds the self-directive standards (i.e. a positive discrepancy). The latter however is uncommon, thus we focus on negative discrepancies (herein self-discrepancies), known to be most 'typical' (Mandel et al., 2017; p. 10). At any time, an individual will internalize a multiplicity of self-states associated with different domains or traits (Sirgy, 1982). For example, a person can have an ideal self in the career success, social life, or physical attractiveness domains, each domain in which self-discrepancies can emerge (Mandel et al., 2017).

Self-discrepancy has been linked to the consumption of idealized user-generated content on SNSs (Devos et al., 2023). This has been evidenced in a variety of domains such as traveling

(Marder et al., 2019), body image (Ahadzadeh et al., 2017), and motherhood (Sun et al., 2022). However, work in this domain chiefly focuses on content within personal SNSs (e.g. Facebook, Instagram), with no studies examining self-discrepancy activation within professional SNSs such as LinkedIn. Unlike personal SNSs, professional SNSs greater emphasize the connection between users and their colleagues, industry experts, and companies (Van Dijck, 2013; Yuan and Lee, 2022). Professional SNSs facilitate and afford users to actively engage in the viewership, creation, and maintenance of professional (rather than personal) identity-related content (Bridgstock, 2019; Mettler, 2018; Mital and Sarkar, 2011; Van Dijck, 2013). Content posted on LinkedIn is largely self-promotional by nature (e.g. job promotions, awards, and career achievements) – and is considered ‘the norm’ (Thigpen, 2021). This contrasts with personal SNSs which are more informal (e.g. memes, holidays, relationships) (Islam et al., 2019; Marder et al., 2019). Due to the differences in both user relationships and content-sharing norms in professional (vs. personal) SNSs, exploring self-discrepancy activation and its downstream effects represents an important area for research.

We propose that viewing idealized self-promotional posts on professional SNSs can make one’s own career salient, acting as a stimulus to activate one’s career-related self-discrepancy (i.e. the perception that their current career success falls below their ideal level). This is because viewership of career success-related stimuli carries meaning that is relevant to one’s own career success. In the words of Higgins (1987), the likelihood a self-discrepancy will activate is dependent on “the relation between its ‘meaning’ and the properties of the stimulus event” (p. 98). Thus, due to the meaning and importance associated with the platform’s afforded content (i.e. career success-related content), it is plausible that consumption of idealized posts on professional SNSs may engender cognitive processes which focus on an introspective self-comparison of one’s existing career progression (i.e. actual self) against their own aspirational



professional standards (i.e. ideal self), which are inherently personal and distinct from the external benchmarks typical of social comparison. Drawing further on self-discrepancy theory, the subsequent sections theorize the possible dual-emotional response to career-related self-discrepancy activation.

## *2.2. Self-Promotional Content and Dejection-Related Emotions*

Discrepancies between actual and ideal selves are widely accepted to result in feelings of dejection (Higgins, 1987; Packard and Wooten, 2013; Tangney, 1999), often manifesting as disappointment, dissatisfaction, or sadness (Higgins, 1987). The intensity of the emotional response from an active discrepancy depends on the magnitude of the discrepancy (i.e. the extent to which the actual self is incongruent from the ideal self). However, the importance of the discrepancy can also shape the level of emotion (Boldero and Francis, 2000). For example, a person who values their attractiveness more greatly is predicted to experience greater emotion compared to a person who values their looks less, from the same size of discrepancy (Ahadzadeh et al., 2017).

Literature on personal SNSs suggests that viewing the idealized life depictions posted by connections can engender dejection-related emotions (Chang, 2018; Ozimek and Bierhoff, 2020; Sherlock and Wagstaff, 2019). In particular, Marder et al. (2019) evidence that feelings of dejection stem from ideal:actual discrepancies, activated by viewing idealized vacation posts of Facebook friends. While self-promotional (or braggy) content is present in personal SNSs, on professional SNSs such as LinkedIn this is the absolute norm and baked into the standard ‘hustle culture’, with the site openly encouraging the dissemination of users’ professional achievements and experiences (Thigpen, 2021; Tobback, 2019; Van Dijck, 2013).

Due to the customary existence of self-promotional content on LinkedIn, it is possible that dejection-related emotional effects may be significantly reduced (compared to personal SNSs), or non-existent, as viewers have become inoculated against its effect, accepting it as the norm following repeated exposure (Miles-Novelo and Anderson, 2020). Alternatively, given the importance of professional identities to people (Marin and Nilă, 2021) and professional SNSs' ability to expose users to the successes of others, which have direct meaning/relevance to themselves (e.g. similar career stage, education, job role), feeling dejected could be more prevalent. Given the lack of research in the area of professional SNSs and the potential for their context to produce different results than personal SNSs, an examination of the emotional effects of viewing idealized self-promotional content is needed.

Following self-discrepancy theory, we propose that viewership of idealized self-promotional content on professional SNSs (e.g. LinkedIn) will activate career-related discrepancies, leading to feelings of dejection. Furthermore, we propose - in line with Higgins (1987) - that the level of dejection experienced proportionally increases with the magnitude of the existent self-discrepancy, based on the assumption that career success is generally important for LinkedIn users (Marin and Nilă, 2021). Thus:

*H1: Viewership of idealized self-promotional content on professional SNSs positively predicts feelings of dejection, which is increased (decreased) at higher (lower) levels of self-discrepancy.*

### *2.3. Self-Promotional Content and Symhedonia*

Although viewing idealized content is largely associated with negative affect (e.g. Marder et al., 2019), it is possible that mixed emotions may arise in this context. Literature on mixed

emotions debates whether positive and negative emotions are irreducible or if both can occur simultaneously. The latter – which consensus has been shifting towards – is known as ‘bittersweet’ (Larsen and McGraw, 2011). This is supported in various research contexts, including: movies (Larsen et al., 2001), college graduations (Ersner-Hershfield et al., 2008), and, more relevant to our study, workplace social networking (Archer-Brown et al., 2018).

Menon and Thompson (2010) discuss how witnessing colleagues succeed makes individuals want to feel happy for them, but jealousy and sadness for oneself may still occur. Happiness for other people’s achievements takes on many names: vicarious joy (Brandner et al., 2020), appreciative joy (Zeng et al., 2017a), or, in the most seminal research as ‘symhedonia’, described as ‘sympathetic joy’ by Royzman and Rozin (2006), who contend that the lack of scholarly attention to this particular emotion is “puzzling” (p. 82). This sentiment was shared historically by Smith (1822) in his seminal work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which states “Our sympathy with sorrow, though no more real, has been more taken notice of than our sympathy with joy.” (p. 46). A recent exception is Brandner et al. (2021) who, through fMRI, support the existence of symhedonia and its positive association with cooperation within relationships.

Existing work on positive emotions stemming from consuming self-promotional content is limited for two reasons. First, simultaneously modeling both general positive and negative affect is problematic (e.g. De Vries et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2016), as measures include valences in ways that are conceptually and empirically inseparable and may result in a muting of reported emotions, which may explain the lack of positive affect found in prior studies. Symhedonia, however, is less likely to suffer from this limitation due to its theoretical separation from generic negative emotion, thus it is found to underpin bittersweet moments

(Larsen and McGraw, 2011; Royzman and Rozin, 2006). Second, prior studies are limited due to their focus on generic positive posts, where the viewer is unlikely to feel much joy, such as seeing a smiling selfie (e.g. Lin and Utz, 2015), unlike posts which explicitly portray achievements for self-promotion which are prevalent on professional SNSs (Tobback, 2019). In the case of the latter, symhedonia is a particularly important consideration, as there is reason to be happy for others.

Overall, we propose that viewing idealized success posts leads to experiencing symhedonia, and that its intensity depends on the viewer's self-discrepancy. People who internalize lower self-discrepancy will feel more happy for others. This is supported first by studies in psychology that associate lower/no actual:ideal discrepancies with increased positive affect (e.g. happiness, cheerfulness) (McIntyre and Eisenstadt, 2011; Moretti and Higgins, 1990); second, by prior work that shows higher self-esteem (i.e. a related construct to self-discrepancy) can increase positive emotion stemming from viewing online posts (Cheng and Nhan, 2021). In other words, following viewing an idealized post, people with greater incongruity between actual and ideal self-states are less likely to feel happy for others (and vice versa). In essence, we propose that people will feel happiness for others based on the degree they are happy within themselves. Thus:

*H2: Viewership of idealized self-promotional content on professional SNSs positively predicts feelings of symhedonia, which is decreased (increased) at higher (lower) levels of self-discrepancy.*

#### *2.4. Relational Closeness*

How one perceives and is influenced by others' achievements is dependent on their relational closeness (Tesser and Campbell, 1982). Relational closeness relates to the level of perceived connectedness and intimacy (i.e. tie strength) between individuals, generally understood in two categories, namely strong ties (e.g. close friends) and weak ties (e.g. acquaintances) (Stsiampkouskaya et al., 2023). Such strong and weak ties are present within users' networks in both personal and professional SNSs (Merrill, 2014). Albeit the case, studies understanding the effects of viewing idealized user-generated content have assumed the poster is a stranger or an acquaintance (De Vries et al., 2018; Marder et al., 2019).

Extant literature supports that strong ties have more influence in activating self-discrepancies and resultant emotional and behavioral outcomes (Mashek and Aron, 2004). For example, Pentina et al. (2009) support that close friends can strongly influence identity-related decisions, such as undergoing cosmetic surgeries, by activating one's actual:ideal discrepancy. Further, the authors support that psychologically close individuals can increase negative emotions stemming from self-discrepancies. These effects occur as the activities of close friends naturally carry greater meaning than the activities of individuals less close. As discrepancy activation depends on the 'meaning' of an event to the discrepancy (Higgins, 1989), it is plausible that seeing the success of a close friend is more likely to give rise to greater feelings of dejection.

In support of this are studies showing that comparison with close friends leads to greater negative affect than comparison with acquaintances (e.g., Pahl et al., 2009; Zuckerman and Jost, 2001). In the closest study to ours, Liu et al. (2016) asked participants to rate the Facebook profiles of close friends (vs. acquaintances), categorizing them into upward versus downward social comparisons. However, interaction effects reveal no differences in explicit measures of

negative (and positive) emotions. Though these studies provide some support for relational closeness as a moderator, they focus on social comparison, where individuals compare themselves externally to strong or weak ties, while our research focuses on internal comparisons (i.e. self-discrepancies).

The work domain is closely linked to the self (Krauss and Orth, 2021) and career success is likely to be of relevance and importance for LinkedIn users (Pan and Zhou, 2013). Therefore, idealized self-promotional posts on LinkedIn should ultimately act as catalysts toward activating career success-based self-discrepancies (Higgins, 1987). However, based on the aforementioned work which supports comparison with close friends (vs. acquaintances) leads to increased impacts on self-discrepancies and greater negative affect (Pentina et al., 2009; Zuckerman and Jost, 2001), we propose that idealized posts from close friends will exacerbate the magnitude of the activated self-discrepancy, resulting in greater dejection. Thus, we propose that viewership of idealized self-promotional content from a close friend (vs. an acquaintance) will result in increased feelings of dejection. Formally:

*H3: Individuals with increased (decreased) self-discrepancy will experience higher (lower) feelings of dejection following viewership of the post of a close friend (acquaintance).*

According to Royzman and Rozin (2006), sympathy may arise for weaker ties, whereas “if one is to feel symhedonia at all, a certain level of positive evaluation and relationship importance has to be already in place” (p. 83). A recent study by Brandner et al. (2020) provides further support through the use of fMRI in contrasting the experience of family members winning versus strangers, where symhedonia occurs in the former but not the latter. Directly supporting

this notion, research by Burke et al. (2020) found that individuals felt happier for their friends (vs. their acquaintances) following viewership of their Facebook posts. Thus, literature supports that greater symhedonia occurs in close relationships. Although greater levels of self-discrepancy should (in general) reduce symhedonia (De Vries et al., 2018), based on the aforementioned literature, we expect that increased relational closeness (i.e. posts by close friends) should bulwark against this effect, increasing feelings of symhedonia. Formally:

*H4: Individuals with increased (decreased) self-discrepancy will experience lower (higher) feelings of symhedonia after viewership of the post of an acquaintance (close friend).*

### *2.5. Self-Regulatory Compensatory IT Use Behaviors*

LinkedIn's ecosystem affords users to actively participate in ways aligned with the visible professional norms (i.e. viewership, engagement, and curation of career-focused content) (Tobback, 2019; Van Dijck, 2013). Such participation should increase the saliency of one's own career status, thus engendering dejection should one be self-discrepant in the domain (Refer to Section 2.2). It is well-accepted that dejection-related emotions stemming from self-discrepancies can lead individuals to engage in self-regulatory behaviors to reduce felt discrepancies (Carver and Scheier, 2001; Mandel et al., 2017). Self-regulatory behaviors encompass any mental or physical processes an individual enacts to manage and compensate for one's (often negative) feelings in an effort to reach a more desirable self-state (Carver and Scheier, 2001; Mandel et al., 2017). Further, self-regulatory behaviors are generally considered dyadic; either manifesting as avoidance-based behaviors (i.e. strategies which involve disengaging from the aversive stimuli) or approach-based behaviors (i.e. more 'appetitive' behaviors that more directly engage with the stimuli) in respect to the active domain (Carver, 2006; Mandel et al., 2017).

In IT literature, scholars generally focus on avoidance-based self-regulation such as IT-use reduction, discontinuance, or switching (Huang et al., 2019; Salo and Frank, 2017; Turel and Qahri-Saremi, 2016). While the general motivations to engage in self-regulation (i.e. negativity reduction) align with IT and psychology literature, the field of psychology offers further behaviors which individuals may employ as compensatory methods towards reducing one's self-discrepancies, namely: *direct resolution* (i.e. direct confrontation to overcome the offending stimulus) and *fluid compensation* (i.e. engaging in self-affirming activities to weaken the offending stimulus), which are approach-based behaviors, and *dissociation* (i.e. mentally avoiding or disconnecting from the offending stimulus) and *escapism* (i.e. distracting oneself with activities unrelated to the offending stimulus), which are avoidance-based behaviors (Mandel et al., 2017: See Table I). Within the present work, we focus directly on these self-regulatory behaviors in relation to changes in IT usage, motivated to offset or reduce an active self-discrepancy which arises from consuming career-related idealized content (Mandel et al., 2017; Osatuyi and Turel, 2020).

[-- INSERT TABLE I --]

Aligning with the aforementioned literature, we propose that individuals with increased feelings of dejection will be more likely to enact avoidance- (i.e. dissociation, escapism) and/or approach-based (i.e. direct resolution, fluid compensation) behaviors, in an effort to reduce the negative emotions being felt. Formally:



*H5: As dejection increases, intentions to engage in self-regulatory IT-use behaviors through (a) direct resolution, (b) fluid compensation, (c) dissociation, and (d) escapism will increase.*

Though the link between self-discrepancies, negative affect, and regulatory behaviors is well established (Carver and Scheier, 2001), little is known about behavior stemming from symhedonia. In line with Higgins (1987)'s seminal work, the absence of self-discrepancies has been shown to result in increased feelings of general happiness and satisfaction, further claiming that research focused on predicting how self-discrepancies can impact positive emotional and motivational behaviors would be considered natural steps in developing the theory further. While some efforts have been made to consider self-discrepancy theory in this way (e.g. Marder et al., 2019), existing investigations are few and far between. Prior work in the field of psychology proposes two sides to envy (i.e. malicious and benign envy), which are expressed by those experiencing these emotions in largely different ways. Unlike malicious envy, in which the envious often vilify and act in a hostile manner towards the envied, an individual with benign envy generally looks upward, inspired towards the goal of making themselves as good as the individual they envy (see Yang and Tang, 2021; see also Crusius and Lange, 2014). Prior work suggests that benign envy (i.e. motivational envy) can arise from both self-discrepancies and general positive affect (Meier and Schäfer, 2018), and can be inspirational toward positive self-action (Latif et al., 2021; Salerno et al., 2019; Wu and Srite, 2021). Due to these links with positive emotions and self-discrepancy, we predict that lesser levels of symhedonia will lead to a decrease in approach-based self-regulatory IT-use behaviors.

Likewise, we propose that decreased symhedonia would simultaneously increase avoidance-based self-regulatory IT-use behaviors. This is supported by a wealth of IT research which supports that joy increases IT continuance and usage (Dickinger et al., 2008; Turel and Serenko, 2012). For example, Lin and Lu (2011) found enjoyment to be the strongest predictor of continued social media usage. Though the construct of symhedonia differs from general positive affect as it focuses on one's joy for others, it is plausible that similar effects on IT discontinuance could emerge should symhedonia be reduced following viewership of idealized posts on LinkedIn. With the aforementioned knowledge in mind, we therefore expect decreased levels of symhedonia to reduce approach-based and increase avoidance-based self-regulatory IT-use behaviors concomitantly. Formally:

*H6: As symhedonia decreases, intentions to engage in self-regulatory IT-use behaviors through (a) direct resolution and (b) fluid compensation will decrease, whereas (c) dissociation and (d) escapism will increase.*

We illustrate the proposed research model below:

[ ---- INSERT FIG. 1 ---- ]

### **3. Pilot Study**

#### *3.1. Overview*

The pilot study is an online experiment which focuses directly on investigating H1 and H2. Specifically, we explore how viewership of idealized self-promotional posts (vs. non-idealized posts) by acquaintances on LinkedIn can cause simultaneous mixed emotions (here dejection

and symhedonia), the magnitude of which is dependent on the user's level of career success self-discrepancy.

### *3.2. Design & Sample*

This pilot study employs a two-condition between-subjects design. Data were collected through Prolific, a commonly used cloud-based panel in IT research (e.g. Adam et al., 2020) specifically targeting current PhD students from the UK and US, who had used LinkedIn within the last 30 days. PhD students were selected as the main sample for this study as the field of academia has commonly understood success criteria (i.e. paper acceptances) which are relatable to the sample, irrespective of their field of work. Likewise, due to the limited sample of PhD student LinkedIn users on Prolific (2023), both UK- and US-based participants were considered for the study as the two countries share cultural similarities (Ashkanasy et al., 2002). The final sample included 109 PhD Students, with an average age of 28 years old ( $SD = 6.64$ ), 74.3% of which were female.

### *3.3. Stimuli*

Stimuli included two LinkedIn posts, one non-idealized (i.e. did not promote the personal success of the poster) and the other idealized (i.e. specifically promoted the personal success of the poster). In the non-idealized scenario, the post contained an image of a paper with the post description stating: "Just wanted to share an interesting paper I came across and read today". To increase internal validity, the same image was present in the idealized scenario; however, the description now stated: "I'm happy to say I had a paper based on my PhD data accepted at one of the top conferences in my field and received really positive feedback from leading researchers in my area!". See Appendix B for visuals of the stimuli. The stimuli were

discussed with PhD students at the institutions of the authors to verify and support the idealized nature of the posts.

### *3.4 Procedure*

Participants first confirmed that they met the specified inclusion criteria and answered questions related to their current and ideal PhD career success, compared to others of similar age, field of work, and education. They were then asked to imagine that an acquaintance of theirs who had been studying for a similar amount of time as them, of a similar age, and researching in the same broad field had posted on LinkedIn. Based on a random allocation to either of these two possible conditions, participants were shown either a mock-up visual of a LinkedIn post which was idealized or non-idealized, as outlined in the previous section. The stimuli presented were shown directly below the text description in which they were meant to imagine. Following the stimuli, the manipulation checks were measured, followed by dependent variable measures, and then covariates.

### *3.5 Measures*

To measure career success self-discrepancy, perceptions of one's own current and ideal career success were compared to others of similar age who are in their specific field of research using two three-item, seven-point Likert scale measurements, amended from Pelham and Swann (1989) (e.g. I feel successful/accomplished/ahead of the game,  $\alpha_{\text{current}} = .90/\alpha_{\text{ideal}} = .90$ ). We then subtracted the results (ideal – current) to generate the career success self-discrepancy measure (see Marder et al., 2019). The post idealization manipulation was measured on a one-item, five-point Likert scale (i.e. How much does the previously shown LinkedIn post specifically promote the success of the poster? – (1) Not at all to (7) A great deal). Dejection was measured using a four-item, seven-point Likert scale measure amended from Marder et al.

(2019) (e.g. I feel sad/unhappy/depressed – (1) Strongly disagree to (7) Strongly agree,  $\alpha = .96$ ) and symhedonia using a five-item, seven-point Likert scale measure amended from Zeng et al. (2017b) (e.g. I feel sincerely happy for my acquaintance after viewing their post – (1) Strongly disagree to (7) Strongly agree,  $\alpha = .94$ ). Covariates included participant gender, age, and their dispositional tendency to feel envy in everyday life. Two attention checks were implemented within the study – individuals who answered incorrectly were removed from the study and their data deleted. See Appendix A for a full list of the measures used within this study.

### 3.6 Analysis & Results

#### 3.6.1 Manipulations

An independent-samples T-Test supported the post idealization manipulation ( $t(107) = -13.586, p < .001$ ), suggesting that individuals perceived the idealized post stimulus as significantly more idealized than the non-idealized stimulus ( $M_{\text{non-idealized}} = 1.71, SD = .79$  vs.  $M_{\text{idealized}} = 3.91, SD = .89, \text{Cohen's } d = .834$ ).

#### 3.6.2 Main Effects

Responses from seven participants revealed no discrepancy or a positive discrepancy. Given our focus on typical discrepancies (i.e. negative discrepancy), these participants were withdrawn from the main analysis. To investigate the impacts of post-idealization on dejection and symhedonia, a Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) was run in IBM SPSS 27 using gender, age, and dispositional envy as control variables. As hypothesized, post idealization had a significant direct impact on both dejection ( $M_{\text{idealized}} = 4.17, SD = 1.59$  vs.  $M_{\text{non-idealized}} = 2.91, SD = 1.23, F(4, 99) = 26.97, p = .000, \eta^2 = .214$ ) and symhedonia ( $M_{\text{idealized}} = 5.00, SD = 1.18$  vs.  $M_{\text{non-idealized}} = 3.70, SD = 1.04, F(4, 99) = 35.75, p = .000, \eta^2 = .265$ ). Specifically, following viewership of an idealized post of an acquaintance on LinkedIn,

participants felt greater levels of dejection while simultaneously feeling greater levels of symhedonia. Visual results for this relationship can be seen in Fig. 2.

[ ---- INSERT FIG. 2 ---- ]

Two bootstrapped moderation analyses (Hayes, 2018) with 5,000 bootstrapped samples were then run to investigate the effect of career self-discrepancy on the relationship between post-idealization and dejection (H1) and symhedonia (H2) using the same control variables. The results showed a significant interaction between post-idealization and career self-discrepancy on dejection ( $\beta = .35$ , 95% CI, LLCI = .01, ULCI = .68,  $p < .05$ ). The conditional effects at low levels of career success discrepancy ( $\beta = .32$ , 95% CI, LLCI = .09, ULCI = .55,  $p < .05$ ) and high levels ( $\beta = .67$ , 95% CI, LLCI = .39, ULCI = .94,  $p < .05$ ) suggest that greater levels of career discrepancy predict greater levels of dejection following viewership of idealized LinkedIn content. No significant interaction was found for discrepancy and post-idealization on symhedonia ( $p = .75$ ), thus H2 was not supported here.

Overall, the pilot study supports that viewership of idealized self-promotion posts on LinkedIn significantly affects viewers' levels of dejection and symhedonia. This suggests that viewership of this content produces bittersweet moments; viewers are both happy for their acquaintance while also feeling dejection. Preliminary support was found for H1, suggesting that increased levels of career success self-discrepancy can increase levels of dejection following exposure to idealized posts. The next study builds on these preliminary results, examining the role of relational closeness as a moderator and four possible self-regulatory IT-use behaviors.

## 4. Main Study

#### *4.1. Overview*

The findings from the pilot study offered initial support that viewership of idealized self-promotional posts on LinkedIn can produce simultaneous mixed positive and negative emotional responses and offered initial support for H1. Moving forward, we turn our attention to the main experiment of the research, which focuses on retesting H1 and H2, as well as investigating the remaining hypotheses (H3 to H6). Aligned with the main research objective outlined in Section 1, this study is an online experiment which specifically aims to provide further knowledge to our understanding of *what* mixed-emotional responses emerge following viewership of idealized self-promotional posts on professional networks, under *which* conditions they occur, and *how* individuals use self-regulatory behaviors to help manage these emotional outcomes.

#### *4.2. Design & Sample*

To explore the hypotheses, the present experiment adopts a two-condition between-subjects design, with participants exposed to an idealized post from either a close friend or an acquaintance. Data were collected using purposive sampling through CloudResearch, a reputable online cloud-based panel (Peer et al., 2021), targeting US residents who were currently employed, held a bachelor's degree, and had used LinkedIn within the last 30 days. The final sample consisted of 865 participants, with a mean age of 37 years ( $SD = 10.36$ ), 52.0% of whom were male, with an average of 238 LinkedIn connections.

#### *4.3. Stimuli*

A pre-test confirmed the realism and idealization of stimuli (See Appendix B). Two distinct but similar idealized posts were used as stimuli in the experiment to minimize the risk of endogeneity. Doing so provides greater variability in the content of the stimuli, while still

retaining similar levels of post idealization. This in turn reduces the risk that the found effects could be caused by unforeseen factors in the model and increases confidence in the effects of post idealization. This method directly follows relevant extant literature on idealized travel posts on Facebook by Marder et al. (2019) and is supported by Sarstedt et al. (2020) as a method of increasing robustness. The first post focused on the poster winning an award. Specifically, the stimulus included an image of an individual pointing towards text, which stated “2021 Rising Star Award” alongside a caption stating, “Guess who just won a place on the 2021 Rising Star List voted by leaders in my industry? I am over the moon that all of my hard work has been recognized”. The second post focused on the poster receiving a new career opportunity, presenting an image of an individual in a suit with their arms in the air with the caption “I’m happy to announce that I’ve jumped to the next step of the career ladder, being hired at one of the top five places to work in my industry! I’m over the moon at this new opportunity that I am starting!”. Both posts focused on the self-promotion of the poster (i.e. were idealized) but were distinct in terms of the content shared and the visual photograph shown.

#### *4.4. Procedure*

After completing inclusion criteria checks, participants’ LinkedIn usage intensity as well as their current and ideal levels of career success were measured. Participants were then randomly presented with one of four possible vignettes and were asked to imagine they were browsing LinkedIn and that they came across the following post (award won/new job) on their feed (by a close friend/an acquaintance). Across all conditions, participants were asked to imagine the poster was someone whom they have known for several years, with a similar age, and working in a similar industry. The visual of the stimuli of the associated vignette was included directly below the description (See Appendix B for visual stimuli). After viewing the stimuli for a



minimum of six seconds, participants were able to continue through the experiment. Attention checks followed the manipulation, as per the pilot. Participants' levels of dejection and symhedonia were then measured, followed by their intentions to engage in self-regulatory IT-use behaviors, and then lastly, covariates.

#### *4.5. Measures*

An extended measure of the career success self-discrepancy construct was used within this study (See Appendix A for details). Dejection and symhedonia were measured as per the pilot study. Further added measures included self-regulatory compensatory IT-use behaviors: escapism, dissociation, fluid compensation, and direct resolution. Specific details of all measurements used are shown in Appendix A: Table II. Gender and dispositional envy were used as control variables, as per the pilot.

#### *4.6. Analysis & Results*

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was employed as the main method of analysis due to the increased complexity of the model (Hair et al., 2019a). As per the pilot, some participants (N = 151) showed no or positive discrepancy. As before, and in line with our focus on negative discrepancies, these participants were excluded from the main analysis, leaving a total sample size of N = 714.

Tests for collinearity, composite reliability, discriminant validity, and common method bias were conducted with all results aligning with commonly accepted thresholds (Hair et al., 2019b). Model fit was supported (Hu and Bentler, 1999) (see Appendix A: Table II; Appendix A: Table III). Significant relationships of path coefficients are specified within Table II, which represents the bootstrapped model (5,000 subsamples). The results show that after exposure to

idealized content, career success discrepancy had significant direct effects on dejection and symhedonia, supporting H1 and H2. Specifically, higher levels of career success discrepancy resulted in greater feelings of dejection ( $\beta = .117, t = 3.122, p < .01$ ) and lower symhedonia ( $\beta = -.117, t = 2.806, p < .01$ ).

The moderator of relational closeness was included within the model to investigate any group-dependent differences between the IV and the DVs. The results suggested that relational closeness was a significant moderator of discrepancy on symhedonia ( $\beta = -.109, t = 2.634, p = .008$ ), suggesting that participants with higher self-discrepancy felt significantly less symhedonia whilst viewing the post of an acquaintance, supporting H4. However, H3 was not supported as dejection did not differ across discrepancy levels when viewing the post of a close friend, suggesting that relational closeness was not a significant moderator of the relationship between discrepancy and dejection ( $p = .353$ ).

Greater feelings of dejection significantly predicted three of the self-regulatory compensatory IT-use behaviors, showing a positive relationship with direct resolution ( $\beta = .116, t = 2.720, p < .01$ ), dissociation ( $\beta = .193, t = 4.466, p < .01$ ), and escapism ( $\beta = .146, t = 3.241, p < .01$ ), thus supporting H5a/c/d. No significant direct relationship was found between feelings of dejection and fluid compensation ( $p = .609$ ). H6 was fully supported. Specifically, there was a significant negative relationship between symhedonia and dissociation ( $\beta = -.174, t = 4.400, p < .01$ ) and escapism ( $\beta = -.114, t = 2.718, p < .01$ ). Thus, as levels of symhedonia reduced, intentions to engage in avoidance-based self-regulation increased. Further, a significant positive relationship existed between symhedonia and fluid compensation ( $\beta = .404, t = 8.567, p < .01$ ), and direct resolution ( $\beta = .403, t = 11.141, p < .01$ ); reduced symhedonia was associated with lesser intentions to engage in approach-based self-regulation.

[ ---- INSERT TABLE II. ---- ]

[ ---- INSERT FIG. 3 ---- ]

The study offers support for H1 and H2, showing that the presence of idealized self-promotional content on LinkedIn leads users to experience feelings of dejection and symhedonia – the former strengthened, and the latter reduced by increased self-discrepancy. Lending support for H4, the results support the importance of the relational closeness of the poster in guiding feelings of symhedonia. Specifically, symhedonia remained increased after viewership of idealized content by a close friend irrespective of an internalized discrepancy, whereas greater symhedonia was only felt when viewing idealized content of acquaintances when the receiver was low (vs. high) in discrepancy. Interestingly, no support was found for H3 as individuals felt similar levels of dejection regardless of whether the idealized post was by a close friend or acquaintance. Furthermore, our results largely supported the relationship between symhedonia and dejection, and self-regulatory IT-use behaviors, supporting H5a/c/d and H6a/b/c/d.

## **5. Discussion**

Providing answers to our primary research objectives, the present work investigates how feelings of career success self-discrepancy can shape mixed-emotional outcomes following consumption of idealized posts of professional SNSs, the moderating role of relational closeness on these outcomes, as well as user’s resultant intentions to engage in four key self-regulatory IT-use behaviors. The research was conducted through one pilot (N = 109) and one main study (N = 714) which was analyzed through PLS-SEM, supporting the following findings:

Firstly, we support that consuming self-promotional posts on professional SNSs can simultaneously result in mixed emotions which are both positive and negative; consumption is bittersweet. Specifically, the present work supports that following viewership of idealized posts on professional SNSs, individuals feel greater levels of both dejection and symhedonia. When seeing an idealized post by another, we do not necessarily feel generally happy, but instead happy for that person (Royzman and Rozin, 2006). Prior studies have generally failed to evidence changes in both positive and negative emotions, though often both were tested (e.g. De Vries et al., 2018). We propose such null results are due to the measures used for each being conceptually and empirically inseparable, therefore suffering from muting effects making the detection of mixed emotions difficult. That is to say, dejection and general happiness are two ends of the same scale, as opposed to symhedonia, which is conceptually separable and more nuanced, specifically considering our happiness for others.

Extending on this finding, we support that exposure to idealized posts on LinkedIn activates actual:ideal self-discrepancies in the career success domain – the extent of which largely plays a role in the severity of dejection (H1) and symhedonia (H2) felt. Offering support for H1, we find across both studies that individuals with greater self-discrepancy show significantly greater feelings of dejection than those who have less incongruence between their actual and ideal level of career success. This finding aligns with the current theoretical underpinnings of self-discrepancy theory (Higgins et al., 1997), which chiefly supports that the extent of dejection felt is commensurate with the magnitude of a self-discrepancy activated by a salient domain (here career success). This finding further resonates with extant literature, for example, Marder et al. (2019) who found a similar effect of self-discrepancy on dejection following exposure to idealized travel posts on Facebook. Unexpectedly, relational closeness did not

bound the relationship between self-discrepancy and dejection, thus H3 was not supported. From a social comparison perspective, this result appears atypical, as literature supports comparisons with close others are more threatening and can exacerbate negative affect (e.g., Pahl et al., 2009; Zuckerman and Jost, 2001). Furthermore, this is in misalignment with Pentina et al. (2009)'s findings which suggest a magnified effect of negative self-evaluative emotions resulting from those who are psychologically close (e.g. friends). Albeit, Higgins (1987) asserts that the magnitude of dejection felt is positively related to the size of an active discrepancy, which is driven by the internal comparison of one's own current and ideal states. Thus, the individual driving the initial self-evaluation in essence may not matter. Rather, the poster of the idealized content simply acts as a stimulus to activate the discrepancy (and therefore, dejection).

Regarding symhedonia, our main study supports a significant relationship between self-discrepancy and feelings of symhedonia. Specifically, we find that individuals with greater levels of career-success self-discrepancy report lesser feelings of symhedonia following exposure to idealized posts, supporting H2. This finding was not found in the context of the pilot study, which focused on PhD students. It is possible that this was due to PhD students being an especially sensitive demographic, facing significant career-based stress and uncertainty, thus dulling the effects on symhedonia (Mackie and Bates, 2019). Further, our work supports H4, as relational closeness played a significant moderating role on the main effects. Specifically, we support that symhedonia for a close friend is felt irrespective of a person's self-discrepancy, highlighting that one's own life position does not take the shine off the success of a close other. On the other hand – and supported by Menon and Thompson (2010) – we find that symhedonia felt in response to an idealized self-promotional post by an acquaintance is contingent upon one's level of self-discrepancy.

Our research also investigates how feelings of dejection and symhedonia can incite self-regulatory behaviors associated with the overarching LinkedIn & professional SNS ecosystem. Specifically, in line with self-regulation theory (Carver and Scheier, 2001; Mandel et al., 2017) we focus on understanding how users may engage in various avoidance- (i.e. dissociation and escapism) and approach-based behaviors (i.e. direct resolution and fluid compensation) as methods of dealing with discrepancy-induced emotions. Here, we find that increased dejection leads to greater intentions to dissociate and escape from the idealized content and the presenting platform. This is similar to IT discontinuance evidenced to occur when engagement with IT causes undesirable effects (Salo and Frank, 2017; Turel and Qahri-Saremi, 2016). Further, dejection was also positively associated with direct resolution behaviors. In line with the theoretical framework, dejection-related outcomes resulting from feelings of self-discrepancy have been known to incite both avoidance and approach-based behaviors as compensatory methods for reducing discrepancies, thus further supporting the results (Mandel et al., 2017).

Likewise, we support that the level of symhedonia felt following exposure to idealized posts impacts intentions to engage in avoidance-based self-regulation (i.e. escapism and dissociation). Specifically, as symhedonia lessens, avoidance-based behaviors increase. These results are strongly supported by extant literature which shows that the level of positive emotion felt is a strong predictor of IT (dis)continuance (Dickinger et al., 2008; Turel and Serenko, 2012). Further, symhedonia has significant impacts on approach-based self-regulatory outcomes. Specifically lower levels of symhedonia decrease intentions to engage in direct resolution and fluid compensation, while increased levels of symhedonia lead to heightened engagement toward these self-regulatory behaviors (Mandel et al., 2017). Thus, having increased levels of happiness for another encourages one not only to bask in the glory

of others, but also to affirm their own achievements communicated through LinkedIn (Randles et al., 2011). Likewise, we show that searching for courses to better oneself can occur as a compensatory response to a discrepancy, as well as from the positivity gleaned from others' successes (Mandel et al., 2017). This finding is in line with theories on self-evaluations and benign envy (Crusius and Lange, 2014; Yang and Tang, 2021), though juxtaposes other SNS research which found non-significant effects of idealized body-image posts on fitness inspiration, and negative effects on body satisfaction (Robinson et al., 2017).

Overall, the effect of viewing idealized self-promotional content on continued use of LinkedIn is like a double-edged sword; dejection pushes people away from the site while symhedonia draws them back in. Our core results support that the balance between positive and negative emotion which regulates continuance with the platform is determined by self-discrepancy. High discrepancy leads to higher/lower negative/positive emotion and vice versa.<sup>1</sup>

## 6. Theoretical Contributions

Using self-discrepancy theory (Higgins et al., 1997) as a theoretical foundation, our work focuses on examining how actual:ideal career success self-discrepancies influence dual-emotional responses and self-regulatory action following the consumption of idealized self-promotional content. We do so particularly in the context of LinkedIn – a site where such content is ubiquitous, unlike traditional SNSs. Through this investigation, we provide four important contributions.

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<sup>1</sup> The aforementioned support is based on the people who are to an extent negatively self-discrepant (ideal > actual), which is true for the majority of people and the focus of our study.

Firstly, whereas prior studies provide mixed results regarding how emotions and affect arise from idealized posts, we help disentangle these differences through our conceptualization of emotions. Here we support that mixed emotions (i.e. dejection and symhedonia) can arise simultaneously. In essence, idealized self-promotional content is bittersweet for viewers. Within these bittersweet moments, we reveal symhedonia as a key positive emotion that arises following exposure to idealized self-promotional content, which until now had not been explicitly discussed in IT literature. When seeing an idealized post by another, we do not necessarily feel generally happy, but instead happy for that person (Royzman and Rozin, 2006). Further, shifting our theoretical lens from social comparison to self-discrepancy theory has allowed us to better detect and explain how these mixed emotions arise, as well as provide greater insights into the mixed-affective impacts of idealized post consumption on self-states, as opposed to our comparisons to others. Likewise, as called for in Higgins' early work on self-discrepancy theory (1987), we provide knowledge towards building a greater understanding of the links between self-discrepancy and positive emotions (here symhedonia). In line with Marder et al. (2019), we propose that further studies on the effects of viewing idealized self-promotional content, or identity-related materials more generally, conceptualize and measure self-discrepancies as these are fundamental to shaping emotions and resultant behaviors. Hence, we recommend scholars investigating mixed emotions stemming from viewing IT-identity-related events to consider the measurement of symhedonia.

Second, following Appel et al. (2016) who argue that more work is needed on boundary conditions of emotions arising from viewing posts within social media, our second contribution is the important role of relational closeness in understanding the implications of viewing idealized self-promotional posts. In line with existing literature, we find positive emotion (here symhedonia) to be highest when the poster is a close friend (Lin and Utz, 2015; Liu et al.,



2016). Overall, we support the role of the poster as important in determining symhedonia and as such, relational closeness should be considered in the design of future studies in this area. On a broader level, we ask scholars considering the global well-being effects of social media to consider network shape, specifically tie strength, in predicting overall effects.

Our third contribution draws from consumer psychology work on self-regulation (Mandel et al., 2017), offering IT literature a broader set of behaviors that stem from engaging with self-related stimuli (here idealized posts). Self-regulatory behaviors are generally considered a consequence of negative self-discrepancies (Mandel et al., 2017). While our findings strongly support this notion, we also evidence that positive emotion (here symhedonia) can motivate self-regulatory IT-use behaviors. Thus, this finding extends literature on self-regulation by evidencing the bifurcation of emotion on self-regulation following viewership of idealized content.

Finally, we answer calls for research in the context of professional social networks, due to their inherent differences from mainstream social media (Krasnova et al., 2015). Our research supports that viewership of idealized self-promotional posts on LinkedIn may activate self-discrepancies related to career success and drive emotional responses, leading to varied approach- and avoidance-related downstream behavioral intentions. Through our work, we provide an important starting point for further investigations on professional SNSs.

## **7. Practical Implications**

Our research highlights important psychological and behavioral effects of LinkedIn usage, which impact use continuance. LinkedIn – through design and mission – actively promotes idealized self-promotional content. This is also encouraged by employers who are aware of the

organizational benefits of their employees using LinkedIn to promote their brand (Arruda, 2014). Albeit the case, we support idealized self-promotional content often has negative effects on viewers, however, this has yet to become properly scrutinized unlike the similar issues Meta has come under great criticism for, such as Instagram promoting unrealistic body images causing depressive feelings (Mills et al., 2018). We provide practical implications for employers and site designers aimed at improving the well-being of users under frequent exposure to idealized self-promotional content, which in turn should support greater engagement with the site.

For employers, many of whom already run LinkedIn, online identity, or digital training programs, we propose strategies that can be integrated within these aimed at reducing negative effects (i.e. dejection). For example, normalization strategies could be applied to reduce the relevance of self-promotional posts to an individual, aimed at reducing the chance of self-discrepancy activation (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2002). These may include *making light* of ‘the hustle’ on LinkedIn, *recalibrating perceptions* (i.e. reminding people that LinkedIn paints a wholly unrealistic picture of the breadth of day-to-day successes of others), or an *everybody feels this way* approach (i.e. communicating statements and statistics supporting that “everyone feels a little sad when they see the constant achievements by others”) (Edwards and Ashkanasy, 2018).

We propose several implications to site designers. Firstly, as our results support that symhedonia is specifically present in idealized posts by close friends, we recommend that the content algorithm be designed in a way that presents the posts of close connections at higher frequencies. For example, allowing users to specify their relationship to their connection (e.g. acquaintance, close friend,) could help prioritize specific users’ posts. In a similar vein,

designers should consider reducing the amount of self-promotional posts overall, in favor of other content (especially if they are unable to tell if the content was posted by an individual of close relation). Second, site designers could consider integrating prompts aimed at normalizing the stimuli (i.e. idealized posts) common on professional networks in an effort to reduce feelings of dejection (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2002; Pignault and Houssemand, 2018). This could include periodic reminders (Purohit et al., 2020) in users' feeds reminding them that other users often promote an unrealistic yardstick for success by emphasizing their achievements rather than failures, with pop-ups or digital nudges of such information triggered by posts dominated by congratulatory comments. Third, site designers can facilitate the ability for users to engage in self-regulatory IT-use behaviors. For example, platforms could ensure there are avenues to 'escape' from the feed of content to help users take their minds off career success (e.g. a tab for industry news, or new industry educational videos). Such an escape may even be actively promoted in the design of the site triggered after viewing a self-promotional post. Furthermore, as we support that both dejection and symhedonia motivate people to learn more and develop (i.e. self-regulation through direct resolution), site designers should ensure to provide adequate content (e.g. through the LinkedIn Hub, see Borsetti, 2021), as well as giving adequate priority to educational product adverts in the algorithm. Lastly, our findings support that LinkedIn, or similar other professional SNSs, may be superior places to advertise education-based products, as the nature of the site keeps the need for career development salient.

## **8. Limitations and Future Research**

This study gives rise to important avenues for further research. First, we present the effect of viewing self-promotional posts on a professional SNS, which as discussed by related prior work is an important area of study, given the inherent difference in norms compared to general

social media (Krasnova et al., 2015). However, we do not directly compare effects across professional and general platforms; future work should fill this gap by focusing on measuring site norms and modeling them on well-being effects. Second, we measure positive and negative emotions through self-reports, which are inherently limited. Future research should aim to replicate our findings complemented with physiological measures (e.g. galvanic skin response). Third, in both studies, participants imagined the ‘posters’ to be of a similar age and career stage to them. Given people will be connected with others of different ages and experiences, which may increase or decrease the ‘relevance’ of their self-promotional posts as a self-related stimulus, future studies should consider manipulating further traits of the poster. In line with this limitation, participants were asked to imagine both their relationship with the fictitious poster, and that the poster had shared a fictitious post. Although experiments using vignettes are well accepted within relevant literature (Good and Hyman, 2021; Gvili and Levy, 2023; Lin and Utz, 2015) and realism was tested and supported with the present work, vignettes do not fully represent reality and are thus a limitation. Therefore, future research should aim to replicate these findings in a more realistic manner by examining the actual usage of professional SNSs and exposure to real idealized posts. Fourth, the present research was focused specifically on individuals who exhibited negative discrepancies and excluded those who held a positive discrepancy. Given the lack of research focused on the understanding of such people, we suggest future research focus specifically on understanding how these individuals may respond to self-promotional posts. Lastly, our samples were from the US and UK, and cultural differences may play a role in determining the effects of self-promotional posts. For example, ‘bragging’ is more socially acceptable and encouraged in certain cultures (Clark and Molinsky, 2014).

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