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EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IDEALIZED MOTHERHOOD PORTRAYALS ON SOCIAL MEDIA, SELF-DISCREPANCY, AND POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION AMONG FIRST-TIME MOTHERS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Going through the process of becoming a first-time mother entails great emotional and identity changes that appear to fall in harmony with the tendencies towards postpartum depression (PPD) that is a critical maternal mental health problem globally. Social media is now firmly entrenched in the current concept of motherhood and can provide mothers with support and information, but can also be indoctrinating them with images of "perfect" motherhood. It is reviewed here to what extent such content could be related to their self-discrepancy and postpartum depressive symptoms of first-time mothers. Based on Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987), it suggests a model whereby idealized content serves to increase upward social comparison, leading to a discrepancy between actual and ideal/ought selves which can engender feelings of guilt, shame, and depression. This is done particularly in the context of Pakistan where prevalence of postpartum depression (PPD) is one of the highest in Asia and use of social media is rapidly increasing, while no study has been conducted to explore this association in the Pakistani context.

INTRODUCTION

The psychological and identity change associated with transition to motherhood is one of the largest stages of such a change for women. The transition of which I speak is not easy for all, especially first-time mothers, and isn't just a physical one (about getting healthy and getting your baby to sleep through the night either), it is a huge negotiating of identities, a balancing of I am the person I was before I gave birth, and I am supposed to be the person I am as a mother. It can also be a time of increased emotional fragility, lack of self-confidence and reliance on others' opinions and advice, especially if this experience has not occurred before. In this sensitive period postpartum depression (PPD) is one of the most important maternal mental health issues across the globe. PPD is a mood disorder that develops in the weeks and months after childbirth, and is marked by a persisting sadness, anxiety, guilt, fatigue and in some cases difficulty bonding with the infant. Not only does it have effects on the mother, but also on the baby's development, the functioning of the family and the general wellbeing of the family unit.

Worldwide, the prevalence of PPD is estimated around 17.2% (Fish-Williamson & Hahn-

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Holbrook, 2023) although PPD prevalence varies significantly across regions, meaning there is a need to explore PPD in cultural and social contexts, not as a fixed phenomenon or process. Conversely, social media fits in seamlessly with daily contemporary motherhood. With restricted in-person support networks, or when there are cultural taboos about openly discussing challenges, Moms are more and more turning to Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok for parenting data, peer group, and emotional support. but this digital experience comes with a downside: moms are also subjected to the heavily-edited, alarmingly positive images of other women's parenting, looks, and home lives. Information which often glosses over the hardship, fatigue and flaws that are part of the true postpartum experience. It is this idealized, almost unattainable standard of 'good motherhood' that resulted from the culturisation. In a qualitative study on real-life mothers, Bauer (2023) revealed that each mother who participated identified the need to be a "perfect mom" ideal, defined not just by the well-balanced child, but also a clean house, pretty body, and an easily managed work and family life. Equivalent motifs are present throughout the larger body of work, with archetypal maternal figures, from the always-jun, supermom to the absolve-or-die, tiger mom to the impeccably designed, beige mom, perpetuating the message that there is little real mothering LIFE in the public, online sphere. The focus of this paper is the psychological implications of this exposure. If mothers over and over again see a caricature of motherhood, a carefully selected image of "the right mom," during a period in which they feel insecure and are negotiating their own identities, then they may be tempted to compare themselves to these types of images, which would seem to lead to feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and lowered self-esteem, and therefore to a plausibly increased risk of depression symptoms during the postpartum period. Although this relationship has started to be studied by scholars in countries around the world such as USA, Indonesia, India, China, Malaysia and Bangladesh, the same does not exist in Pakistan which has one of the highest prevalence rates of postpartum depression in Asia and a swift growth of social media users.

However, no study has specifically explored interactions between content about idealized maternity, social comparison and self-discrepancy experiences in the context of first-time Pakistani mothers, creating a significant lacuna between the perceived scale of the issue and evidence available in the region. The aim of this review is therefore to collate the current literature on idealized motherhood, social media usage, social comparison, self-discrepancy and postpartum depression; propose a model for idealized motherhood based on the literature appropriate for the Pakistani context and highlight areas for future empirical studies.

IDEALIZED MOTHERHOOD PORTRAYALS

Social media has created the hub of defining and presenting the idea of a perfect motherhood. From a variety of research studies, one image of the "perfect mom" keeps coming up, the one that not only has a perfect child but also a perfect marriage, career, and body (Bauer, 2023). A qualitative interview study by Bauer's (2023) with 9 mothers revealed that all mothers found the word 'perfect' to be an adjective to describe how they were made to feel motherhood was portrayed in the media and several of the mothers indicated that it was not possible to live up to the attributes that were being required of mothers all the time. This idealization is deeply connected to what is often referred to as "curated" and "selective content-sharing. According to Rochimah et al. (2020), Instagram in particular has given opportunity for the appearance of the figure of Instagram Mom. An Instagram mom that portrays a challenging or "normal" mothering experience in a flawlessly planned-out photo.

Through their qualitative analysis of 40 million mothers, they concluded that seeing a lot of such curated content caused several participants to feel that their own lives, their bodies or parenting were somehow inferior, despite having an intellectual understanding that what they were seeing was manicured content. Expanding upon this, Özkan (2025) categorizes the different kinds of motherhood "types" found in contemporary digital

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culture based on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy framework: tiger mom, who is devoted to strict parenting and achieving a certain standard of success; wine mom, who lightens up about the difficulties of intense motherhood with humor and suddenly turned-to-the realized-alcohol-drinking; alpha mom, who aspires to perfectionism both in parenting and in her career and life; and beige mom, whose most recent type emphasizes minimalist and neutral-toned aesthetics in child-rearing and domestic life. Though different in style, each typology is representative of the same driving force towards the fulfillment of an unattainable ideal of "good mothering" for a target audience, in this context online.

Collectively, these studies indicate that idealized representations of motherhood in social media are not incidental but structurally coded in their operation, via curation, performative acts and the creation of "types" of "good" mothers to aspire to, as well as having direct impact on how real mothers perceive their own inadequacy (Bauer, 2023; Özkan, 2025; Rochimah et al., 2020).

POSITIVE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON POSTPARTUM WELLBEING

The literature indicates that social media can be a positive catalyst in the mothers' postpartum wellbeing, as a source of information, a place of peer community, emotional validation and support that may not always be present offline. Based on a content analysis of 705 posts under a hashtag that brings together questions about postpartum depression on the Chinese platform Zhihu, Zou et al. (2024) showed that women are actively engaging with online communities via social media to get informed and emotional responses to their distress through a space where they can seek support, disclose symptoms when family support or communication about their distress is limited or unavailable. For some mothers, this means that social media may serve as an alternative or complement to in-person support networks, particularly when in-person support networks are not openly available, including within cultural frameworks that may not explicitly support the disclosure of postpartum struggles.

In the same way, Yadav et al., 2025 discovered that although the use of social media may lead to psychological pressures, the mothers who used social media also benefited from the information received. Citta et al. (2024) also conducted a qualitative study on first-time Indonesian mothers, pointing out the positive side of Instagram's content for mothers, namely that it gave mothers a sense of reassurance, connectedness, and emotional support. The study results indicate that social media can make a positive impact on postpartum wellbeing, supporting women's feeling of being informed, connected and less alone.

NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON POSTPARTUM WELLBEING

Despite positive benefits of using social media, being on social media has been associated with mental health issues for postpartum mothers. In a quantitative study of 100 postpartum mothers in *India*, Yadav et al. (2025) revealed that women who experienced curated and idealized images of motherhood on social media lifted up self-comparison and mental strain. Such idealized images can instill unrealistic expectations of motherhood, parenting, appearance and/or postpartum healing, ultimately causing mothers to second guess themselves.

In the same vein, Citta et al.'s (2024) qualitative analysis of social media motherhood content for first-time mothers in *Indonesia* revealed that this type of content might exacerbate negative self-perceptions and feelings of inadequacy, especially regarding postpartum bodies. The researchers also found that how the mothers internalized and processed the content determined whether it could have any positive impact, or if it had negative consequences on their children. This implies that no one is equally affected by social media and that the impact of social media may vary dependent on the psychological processing of an individual or his or her particular situation. Combined, social media offers great information, connections and emotional support however, it also offers unrealistic standards, social comparison, concerns with body image and feelings of inadequacy to postpartum mothers. So,

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its effect on the post-partum quality of life should be considered as complicated and multifactorial.

POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION AND SOCIAL MEDIA – REGIONAL EVIDENCE FROM ASIA

Most of the previous studies on the perception of ideal motherhood, social comparison and postpartum psychological well-being are conducted in Western countries (mainly America and Europe) (Bauer, 2023; Özkan, 2025). Yet, a small but increasingly emerging literature from Asian countries indicates that this relationship between social media and postpartum depression is not universally cultural and not well understood outside of Western populations, and calls for region-specific investigations and especially Pakistan-specific investigations.

In *China*, Wang et al. (2023) have performed a cross-sectional study of 2,661 pregnant women to investigate the intensity of SNS (WeChat) usage and the occurrence of depression. Their results were mixed with one dimension of WeChat usage demonstrating no significant relationship with depression, and another dimension demonstrating a positive relationship with depression, suggesting it might not be the social media use itself but the kinds of social media use that could result in psychological risks. The message type-categorization is significant for other Asian contexts, such as Pakistan as both the dominant platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) and WeChat carry unique patterns for idealized content.

However, in *Malaysia*, there has been a study on postpartum depression awareness, but not among the mothers themselves, instead they surveyed the wider social support circle of mothers, which comprising of 394 people recruited using WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram during the Covid-19 pandemic (Alsabi et al., 2022). Their results indicated "huge gaps in postpartum depression knowledge and attitudes even among the individuals most likely to have contact with new mothers" and the authors explicitly requested for further studies considering cultural and ethnic differences in postpartum support – a gap also not fulfilled for Pakistani populations.

A study done in *Bangladesh* previously (Saha & Das, 2017) is one of the first regional studies which explored the association of SNS use and postpartum depression among 93 women. This study was methodologically limited in scope but importantly began to highlight a new factor in postpartum mental health earlier than a decade ago, with the fact that social media was of relevance when many people across South Asia share similar cultural, religious and family constructs in their lives despite the absence of research from Pakistan in the same regard. Combined with regional evidence, this indicates two things. Second, its connection to social media is not only measurable but also has a noticeable relationship in multiple contexts in Asia (Alsabi et al., 2022; Saha & Das, 2017; Wang et al., 2023), thus it is not necessarily a phenomenon linked to Western media culture. Secondly, to date there is no similar study done specifically in Pakistan as to how close the two countries from geographic and cultural perspective are.

SOCIAL COMPARISON AMONG MOTHERS

Social comparison of mothers throughout the studies examined, one common theme was the mother's comparison of herself with women perceived as "better mothers," more successful, and/or capable, those who seemingly excel in both their work and family roles easily and at the same time, such as the supermom and the influencer. This comparison directly illustrates the emotional impact of this comparison, as emerging in the interviews with Bauer's (2023) participants was a recurring feeling of shame and inadequacy when they saw other moms' posts, leaving one participant stating that she would often spiral into "this pit of not being good enough. This is by no means a phenomenon of the general literature discussed in the present paper. It is the link between being exposed to content about idealized motherhood, and the emotional and psychological impacts throughout.

Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987) will be introduced to better explain why such social comparison is expected to happen and how the comparison can lead to guilt, shame, and anxiety,

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as reported by the mothers of the study by Bauer et al. (2023).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

SOCIAL COMPARISON THEORY

The Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests that it is a driving internal necessity to check and assess one's own skills and situations by comparing themselves to others if there are no obvious criteria for self-evaluation. This need is exacerbated when the comparison target is perceived as similar, especially when uncertainty is present. The postpartum period is a period of truthful uncertainty, particularly for the first time moms without any personal experience to compare with. Social media frames mothers as salient comparison targets, and the content that mothers see is mostly idealized—offering mostly upward comparisons, where other mothers are doing a better job of coping with motherhood. Encouraged by Festinger's theory (1954), first time mothers who see such content are urged to compare their performance with that of what they see, and it is sometimes done in a negative way. The first mechanism, the social comparison, is explained by the Social Comparison Theory in the context of the present study. This comparison approach is thought to be the initial stage towards the self-discrepancy described in the next section (Higgins 1987), which outlines what this comparison brings about psychologically.

SELF-DISCREPANCY THEORY

According to Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987), people possess multiple self-guides they use to check themselves when making self-evaluations of their actual or real self, the ideal or should be self and the ought or must be self. Often, the perceived mismatch between one's actual self and ideals or beliefs triggers psychological distress; Higgins defines that the specific mismatch elicits a specific type of psychological reaction. Any Actual vs Ideal discrepancies are linked with dejection related emotions such as sadness, disappointment, and loss, because they repeatedly represent the lack of hope for a more positive outcome. Actual-vs-ought discrepancies are, by contrast, related to emotions of agitation, guilt, anxiety and threat and refer to the failure of achieving a singular duty or obligation. This separation is an immediate one that can be applied in the case of first-time moms who run a mommy blog.

A mother that senses a disparity between her ideal self (who she sees herself as being), and who she is (actual self) may have feelings of sadness and a failure to live up to her own idealization of herself. Perhaps a mother feels there is a disconnect between what is (self) and what she thinks ought to be (ought self), according to her family, cultural or societal notions of "good mothering". Within the context of Pakistan's cultural norms--where motherhood is highly duty-bound in the families and by society--this "ought"-self pathway may be particularly prominent and yield greater anxiety- and guilt-related distress than the "ideal"-self pathway alone. Now, within the paradigm of this study the social comparison that ensues from the Idealized Motherhood content, as suggested by Festinger (1954), is theorized to produce certain negative emotional states, which, overtime and within this paradigm, could be correlated with postpartum depressive symptoms.

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Although the theories of Social Comparison Theory and Self-Discrepancy Theory are complementary and distinct, the theory of Social Comparison Theory has been examined with idealized motherhood content on social media whereas the theory of Self-Discrepancy Theory has not been examined within the context of motherhood. The nature of the process that individuals use to evaluate themselves in relation to others is emphasized in Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954). Social media messages that selectively and successfully feature positive images of motherhood, looks, and home life can lead to social comparisons. Especially in the face of the ambiguity of early mothership and when no objective criteria exist, a mother might have another mother as a very close comparison standard and assess himself or herself in relation to that standard.

In contrast, Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987) is about the discrepancies between the actual and internal self. After comparing with the

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idealizations of motherhood, a mother may feel a gap between what she did and what she wanted to do as a mother, idealized mother (mother that she would like to be), which can generate dejection (sadness, disappointment) related emotions. Likewise, a discrepancy with the actual self and ought self, which is the kind of mom one is supposed to be and may be influenced by family and/or cultural beliefs, can generate agitation associated feelings including guilt, concern, and threat. So, although the former is a theory that focuses on the evaluation of oneself in the context of others, the latter focuses on the psychological implications of this gap between the real self and established norms.

Theories, taken in conjunction, offer different points of view about the emotional responses that can fall after watching idealized motherhood images. These feelings (guilt, shame, inadequacy, anxiety or sadness) can be brought on all together across the postpartum period and are linked to postpartum depressive symptoms especially for those who have no prior experience to withstand these comparisons, such as first-time mothers. The cultural perceptions of 'motherhood' and 'mental health' in Pakistan and its effects on women with complicated pregnancies and childbirths.

MATERNAL MENTAL HEALTH AND CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS OF MOTHERHOOD IN PAKISTAN

At the population level, PPD is a significant public health issue in Pakistan where its prevalence rate is among the highest in Asia. The rates are varied from 28% to 63% (Aliani & Khowaja, 2017 cited in Sajjad et al., 2024) with one of the latest studies even reporting up to 67.96%, which is about four times higher compared with the global average (Zulfiqar et al., 2023 cited in Sajjad et al., 2024).

A review published in 2023 showed that the prevalence of antenatal depression was 37% (pooled prevalence from 2021 systematic review and meta-analysis), compared to postnatal depression rate at 3 months, 6 months, and 12 months postpartum in 2021, which was 34.2%, 40.9% and 43.1%, respectively (Atif et al., 2021, cited in the review). This wide fluctuation between various studies is probably due to the difference in populations, test kit used and areas under study but at all times, the prevalence of PPD reported in Pakistan has been well above the world-wide prevalence baseline figure. Several cultural and structural risk factors contribute to the increased prevalence of these problems, including cultural beliefs that ask the mother to put the wellbeing of the family over her own, cultural beliefs that encourage a joint family system, the postpartum customs, stigma around mental health, and socio-economic issues like poverty and lack of healthcare access (Sajjad et al., 2024).

In the joint family system prevalent in Pakistan, mothers are often closely observed and expected to articulate and behave according to a local version of the 'good mother' formulated by the culture, which functions differently and in parallel to the media. To complicate this, stigma about the open discussion of mental health problems, prevents many Pakistani mothers facing postpartum distress from discussing their symptoms or seeking help, therefore there is a significant number of PPD cases that fall outside the healthcare system which go unidentified and untreated.

USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AMONG MOTHERS IN PAKISTAN

The use of social media has significantly increased in Pakistan in the past few years. By end 2025, Pakistan's internet population would be around 117 million people representing 45.6% of the total population, while the active social media user identities would number 79.9 million representing 31.2% of the population. More than 67.5 million people use Facebook, and Instagram has about 23.5 million; there's still rapid growth on other apps, including TikTok and WhatsApp. This brings many and also growing numbers of Pakistani women, especially new and first-time moms, closer to content that idealizes mothers on both local and global media platforms, whether it's locally created parenting influencers or globally successfully "supermoms" and "tiger moms". In this context, mechanisms of social comparison and self-discrepancy are intuitively in operation for Pakistani mothers; however, their effects have not yet been tested in this population.

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RESEARCH GAP

While extensive research on postpartum depression and maternal mental health issues has taken place internationally and some studies in Pakistan, use of social media and idealized images of motherhood have been explored in isolation, no known study has examined idealized motherhood images on social media, social comparison, self-discrepancy and postpartum depression among first time mothers together in one theoretical setting in Pakistan. Despite the high prevalence and significant overall risk factors including poverty, education, and family support (Bhatti et al., 2024; Sajjad et al., 2024), existing PPD studies in Pakistan have primarily focused on prevalence rates, making it crucial to investigate the potential mechanisms or factors through which social media exposure may influence features of overly unique identity. Previous research on PPD in Pakistan has largely been descriptive, with most studies focusing on prevalence rates and overall risk factors such as poverty, education, and family support; therefore, it is important to explore the possibilities of social comparison and self-discrepancy, two psychological mechanisms through which social media exposure may act, and how this exposure may affect features of overly unique identity. This review believes that it fills a real and timely need, particularly for Pakistan which has a disproportionately high prevalence of PPD, along with a burgeoning user base of social media.

DISCUSSION, FINDINGS, AND RESULTS

The aim of this review was to explore the possible relationships between idealized motherhood images depicted on social media and postpartum depression (PPD), focusing on the Pakistani setting. There was a common theme in the literature: around the social media, idealized motherhood was constructed and performed either through the perfect zero (Bauer, 2023) or through curating content by influencers (Rochimah et al., 2020) or through the distinct Mom identities like tiger mom, wine mom, alpha mom, or beige mom (Özkan, 2025). These depictions are also not incidental, but integral to the social media platform and the ways in which it works through selective information sharing, algorithmic dissemination of 'ideal' content and the monetary logic of ‘influencer-ship’, so for many women mothers’ ‘unrealistic’ forms of motherhood are not sporadic occurrences, but a regular feature of the way social media is used. A theoretical two-stage model was used to hypothesize in this review, how this exposure may lead to a psychological distress.

First, in line with Social Comparative Theory (Festinger, 1954), during a context of postpartum insecurity, mothers are encouraged to make comparisons to curate images of seemingly similar mothers and are found to compare uniformly upwards.

Second, shyness is also consistent with Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987) postulating a gap between the actual self and an ideal self (dejection-related: sadness or disappointment) or ought self (agitation-related: guilt and anxiety) as a result of this comparison process. Just like this, participants in Bauer's (2023) study reported feeling “massive shame” after watching other mothers' social media and continuously feeling like they were not “good enough,” while the studies of Yadav et al. (2025) and Citta et al. (2024) revealed similar comparison-driven distress in mothers in India and Indonesia, respectively, after viewing moms online.

Though not directly tested in any of the studies reviewed here, the emotional responses seen repeatedly were guilt, shame, inadequacy and anxiety, which overlap considerably with known symptom clusters of PPD, giving credence that this distress could lead to PPD despite the lack of an empirical test of a causal pathway in the reviewed studies. Particularly noteworthy is the relevance for Pakistan, a country with already a high prevalence rate of PPD as reported up to 67.96% in the samples (Zulfiqar et al., 2023 as cited by Sajjad et al., 2024) and it is reported that more than 79 million people have active social media accounts now in Pakistan (Data Reported, 2026). Beyond the largely Western and East Asian literature reviewed here, the Pakistani cultural context would seem to support the possibility that the ought-self (guilt and anxiety from failure to meet obligatory aspects) pathway in Higgins's

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(1987) model is pertinent here, and more so to Pakistani mothers than the ideal-self pathway, which has been highlighted in studies conducted in other contexts. This is a theoretically generated but an empirically untested proposition as none of the studies specifically focused on this combined pathway in Pakistan has been observed so far. It should be recognized that there are strengths and weaknesses to the evidence base on which this review is based.

Indian, Indonesian, Chinese, Malaysian, and Bangladeshi context studies reveal that the connection between social media and mental health of the postpartum period can be measured and is indeed meaningful in different Asian contexts and not a purely Western issue. Some of these studies, however, have been conducted in small qualitative sample sizes (e.g., Citta et al., 2024, N=8), on single platforms only (Zou et al., 2024), and/or with populations outside of or near postpartum women (e.g., Alsabi et al., 2022). To date, no study reviewed combines idealized depictions of motherhood, social comparisons, self-discrepancy and postpartum depression in a single conceptualization, and no study has done so within the context of Pakistan specifically, highlighting that the model presented in this study is just a conceptual model which is, in theory, coherent and aligned with the available literature and may now be tested empirically.

CONCLUSION

The current review has investigated a possible link between the social media representations of ideal motherhood and self-discrepancy and postpartum depression (PPD) among first time mothers in Pakistan. The books indicated that the representations of motherhood on social media are all the time idealized, thus for mothers, notably those unsure on their very first postpartum expertise, they tend to compare themselves to these representations. Through Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) this comparison process may be seen as related to self-discrepancy, that is, a perceived discrepancy between the actual self and one's ideal or ought self (Higgins, 1987), and consequently relate to negative emotional phenomena such as guilt, shame, inadequacy, and anxiety. A direct indication of this process to PPD clinical symptoms can be theoretically argued without solid empirical evidence; however, this pattern is consistent with regional data and is relevant for Pakistan as this country has a higher prevalence of PPD and has a fast growth in the use of social media. Since there is no research done in Pakistan which correlates these factors, more studies with a starting point of qualitative approach based on Pakistani mothers lived experiences are required to modify and validate the theoretical framework developed in this review.

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