Performing the empowered self: Pseudoscience, individualism, and the Iranian self-development microcelebrities

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Article Info	Abstract
	Background: Self-development microcelebrities constitute a distinct and rapidly expanding subtype within the broader culture of fame. These figures primarily operate within the digital self-help domain, offering audiences simplified psychological and lifestyle concepts that promise personal transformation through adherence to their guidance. Contemporary self-help discourse is rooted in the positive psychology movement that gained traction in the United States during the late 20th century and is heavily influenced by neoliberal ideologies that emphasize individual agency and responsibility. **Aims:** In this research, Instagram pages of Iranian self-development microcelebrities were studied to understand what they share with their audience and the various methods they employ to engage with them. **Methodology:** This study analyzes the Instagram accounts of Iranian self-development microcelebrities with follower counts exceeding 300,000, using a thematic analysis approach. Initially, each account was analyzed individually, followed by a cross-case analysis to identify recurring thematic patterns. **Findings:** The analysis revealed three overarching themes—pseudoscience, the primacy of luck and the inner self, and self-made rules—comprising seven organizing themes and 31 basic themes. The findings indicate that these microcelebrities promote a form of hyper-individualism aligned with neoliberal values. **Conclusion:** This model of subjectivity emphasizes psychological self-regulation and inner transformation while detaching individuals from social and political engagement.

1. Introduction

The dynamics of celebrity culture continue to evolve, giving rise to new and increasingly fragmented forms of visibility that align with the affordances of digital media. Among these, *microcelebrities* have emerged as a salient category—individuals who cultivate a public persona through sustained interaction with audiences on social media platforms. Far from being a uniform phenomenon, microcelebrity culture manifests in various subtypes across thematic domains, each reflecting and reinforcing distinct cultural values and narratives. Enabled by the decentralized architecture of platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, microcelebrities operate as both content creators and symbolic figures, constructing legitimacy and influence by embedding themselves within the visual, affective, and algorithmic logics of these media environments (Shahghasemi, 2025). Through this mediated visibility, they not only attract followers but also actively shape discourses around identity, success, and social belonging.

One notable area into which microcelebrities have increasingly ventured is self-development and self-help. While this field has historical roots extending beyond the digital era, its appropriation by microcelebrities marks a novel configuration of individual agency and influence. In this context, self-development microcelebrities produce content centered on themes of self-improvement, growth, and the pursuit of a better life. Their content spans multiple domains—including economic, social, and cultural spheres—as well as lifestyle practices, reflecting a broad and often holistic approach to self-betterment.

This content typically adopts an advisory or didactic tone, offering audiences insights, perspectives, and strategies purported to enhance personal well-being and success. Rather than confining themselves to entertainment or aesthetic self-presentation, these figures position themselves as knowledgeable authorities or mentors, assuming roles akin to coaches, educators, or motivational figures. Through this dynamic, a distinct form of microcelebrity emerges—one that derives influence not merely from visibility, but from the perceived capacity to guide followers toward personal transformation.

Microcelebrities of self-development in the virtual space present themselves as successful examples of those who have achieved success by following self-development instructions. To enhance their influence, these microcelebrities often present themselves in aesthetically curated, luxurious environments. This self-presentation strategy signals to followers that such lifestyles are attainable through adherence to the influencers' advice. As with many figures in the microcelebrity sphere, their authority is constructed within a predominantly visual economy. Platforms like Instagram and YouTube, which prioritize image-driven content, provide the ideal infrastructure for this performative visibility. The content they share is either inherently visual or heavily reliant on

visual augmentation, enabling audiences to interpret their messages more effectively and perceive these individuals as aspirational models of success.

Social media platforms have become increasingly integral to everyday life, shaping how individuals communicate, form relationships, access information, and construct personal and collective identities. Their algorithmic nature provides benefits for the corporations (Sabbar & Khiyaban, 2023) but users benefit from them too. No longer confined to leisure or entertainment, social media now permeate diverse aspects of social, political, and economic activity, influencing everything from public discourse and consumer behavior to professional networking and mental health (Bengtsson & Johansson, 2022; Shahghasemi et al., 2025). The number of followers of these microcelebrities on social media is steadily increasing, and many people view their content and follow their advice. One notable feature of microcelebrities in the field of self-development is that they draw on various scientific and non-scientific branches when curating content for their pages, and they lack a clear source for the information they provide to their audience. In fact, they consistently send various types of information from different sources to their audience, which often lacks clear credibility. Microcelebrities working in the self-help and self-development fields always involve every aspect of people's lives in personal development, to the extent that self-development is viewed as a whole in which human behaviors and relationships can be organized and aligned with it. On the other hand, many of these microcelebrities not only aim to educate their audience about self-development methods but also see it as a way to generate income. Beyond the capital they gain from the audience's attention economy, they introduce packages, courses, and seminars, which they describe as ways to improve life. These seminars and courses are trusted by the audience, who participate in them to achieve a better life. Thus, an economic factor also plays a role in the growth of microcelebrities in the self-development and self-help field.

Studying social media has become essential in celebrity studies because public visibility, reputation building, and audience engagement now unfold on platforms where celebrities communicate directly with followers, shape narratives about themselves, and manage the constant pressures of attention (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). These environments reveal how fame is produced, contested, and monetized in real time, giving researchers a clearer view of how influence works and how audiences respond to different strategies of self-presentation. In recent years, advances in AI have made the analysis of these dynamics far more practical, as machine-learning tools can sift through large volumes of posts, comments, and interaction patterns with a speed and precision that earlier methods could not match (Salehi & Habib Zadeh Khiyaban, 2025). Nevertheless, we still believe that qualitative studies

have their own advantages and in some topics they still yield better results. In this research, Instagram pages of Iranian self-development microcelebrities were studied to understand what they share with their audience and the various methods they employ to engage with them.

2. Discussion
2.1. Pseudoscience
Pseudoscience is a form+ of false science that presents itself as legitimate science. However, pseudoscientific beliefs are widespread among various segments of the population, with many individuals engaged in pseudoscience. These beliefs span different fields, including astrology, medicine, biology, and broad public domains (Martin, 1994: 357-359). One important feature that distinguishes pseudoscience from science is the lack of accumulation of knowledge in pseudoscience. Hedges explains this by stating that the absence of accumulated results over time is a defining characteristic of pseudoscience, and it is not possible to establish a meaningful connection between individuals who believe in a branch of pseudoscience and others within the same branch (Pigliucci, 2010: 14). Pseudoscience is a historical phenomenon whose emergence and nature are embedded in its institutions, followers, and its evolving characteristics (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2018: 3-4) In fact, while pseudoscience is highly scattered and variable, and does not follow any specific organizing principles or structure, it is important to note that pseudoscience remains dependent on science. Those who follow pseudoscience often attempt to present their views and opinions in a scientific form and framework (ibid: 16). Believers in pseudoscience follow theories rooted in their unrealistic hopes. They strongly resist evidence that contradicts their beliefs and adhere to methods that cannot be supported by evidence. They avoid evidence that challenges their theories (McIntyre, 2019: 174).

Another point of distinction between science and pseudoscience is that science uses logical and observable tools to reach conclusions. In contrast, pseudoscience, while claiming to use scientific methods, incorrectly applies sources, logic, and observational methods, including texts and theories (Smith, 2010: 38) Hines compares pseudoscience to the gray areas surrounding facts, which makes their definition difficult. However, the most common feature of pseudoscience is its reliance on hypotheses that are not falsifiable. When confronted with evidence that contradicts beliefs rooted in pseudoscience, followers modify their hypotheses in ways that make them unfalsifiable (Hines, 2003: 1). Believers and proponents of pseudoscience are unhappy when their claims are subjected to serious scrutiny. Those who ask for more evidence to support their claims are often accused of being skeptics (ibid: 3-5).

2.2. Self-help and self-development

There is no clear consensus on the terminology used to describe the broader concept of self-help, as terms such as *self-help*, *self-development*, and *self-improvement* are frequently used interchangeably. For instance, *self-care* generally refers to practices aimed at enhancing one's physical and emotional well-being, particularly during periods of stress. According to the Oxford Dictionary, *self-development* denotes an individual's efforts to improve their knowledge, skills, or quality of life, making it closely aligned with the broader notion of self-help. Crucially, both *self-development* and *self-help* fall under the larger umbrella of the "self-improvement movement" and refer to overlapping sets of practices and ideologies (Cales, 2020: 18-19). Cales argues that self-development and positive psychology are mutually reinforcing frameworks, noting that the latter has played a significant role in legitimizing and expanding the popularity of the former. Positive psychology, in this view, represents an optimistic psychological paradigm that focuses on cultivating strengths while intentionally disregarding negative aspects of human experience. By emphasizing personal potential and well-being, it seeks to replace perceived deficiencies with internal assets and capabilities (Cales, 2020: 47-49).

The self-help movement, in its modern sense, is a social movement that experienced significant growth between the 1960s and 1980s (Williams, 1990: 311). Self-help was initially conceived as a movement in which groups came together to help achieve a specific goal through approaches such as addressing common needs, overcoming life challenges, and achieving desired changes in life. These groups were commonly focused on one of the four aspects: behavioral control, shared predicament, survival orientation, or personal growth (King, 1980: 34). In humanistic psychology, self-help refers to groups that are managed without the presence of a trained professional. Some of the actions and behaviors addressed in self-help stem from psychological and transcendental levels, such as yoga or practices led by gurus, which can be examined within mystical-religious frameworks (Stear, 1985: 306). Self-help is a movement that, while promising improvement and the resolution of all problems to its followers, often fails and lacks guarantees. It encompasses a wide range of individuals, from motivational speakers and success workshop organizers to life coaches, but ultimately results in nothing more than financial profit for the organizers, or rather, the false leaders of these movements. Salerno considers self-help to be a form of a fabricated business, in which non-experts in various fields identify flaws in individuals and then sell them false treatments—treatments that have no basis and lead to nothing but a waste of time and money for those involved in this movement (Salerno, 2005: 3-4).

2.3. Self-improvement and the New Brave World

The study of self-help literature in the three decades leading up to the 21st century stems from the fact that counseling books represent a kind of literature that directs attention inward. This literature, using metaphors, moves in the direction of liberalism and, in light of the economic changes of the 1970s—marked by wage cuts and increased competition in the labor market—reflects several transformations. Among these transformations is a return to a kind of social Darwinism that aligns with entrepreneurial values; metaphors like "you should think for yourself" and similar expressions are indicative of this. Part of these transformations concerns women, both placing them in the path of market values and portraying their lives as a kind of artwork. The result of this perspective can be seen in the metaphor of life as a sport, an adventure, or a journey, where individuals are depicted as players who must overcome others (McGee, 2005: 51-52).

This very issue led them to resort to a concept that allowed them to forget this pressure in order to continue living within the framework of neoliberal relations. The widespread nature of self-development and self-help literature is largely aligned with and consistent with the prevailing neoliberal conditions of the late 20th century. According to this perspective, human problems are largely reduced to personal matters, disregarding economic and social issues such as economic injustice and structural problems (Rimke, 2020: 40-41). Personal development, with its emphasis on concepts derived from the principle of individuality, excessively defends prescriptions based on self-improvement that stress an atomized world, separating the individual from the social realm. In this literature, the individualistic aspect is prioritized over social matters, marking the intersection of self-development with liberal thought. This is because, from this viewpoint, the individual is solely responsible for everything and must work toward rectifying their own issues (ibid: 62).

Indeed, much like in neoliberal societies, individuals are conceptualized as atomized units who function as autonomous agents within broader networks of human interaction (Asen, 2018: 173). Within the self-help paradigm, society is reframed as a collection of disconnected individuals, where personal autonomy and independence from collective structures are emphasized as the means through which life's challenges are addressed. This aligns with the goals of policies derived from advanced liberal democracies. In advanced liberal societies, the requirements, actions, and recommendations of self-help are aligned with the desires and goals of society or government, in that, according to these principles, the individual is fully responsible for their own successes and failures (Rimke, 2000: 62-63).

3. Methodology

Qualitative researchers use a qualitative approach to collect data, to ask

questions, and to remain sensitive to the issues under study, and through a form of inductive analysis, they identify patterns in the data and themes. Qualitative research can be understood as a kind of inquiry in which the researcher, drawing on what can be seen and heard, arrives at specific conclusions and then categorizes these findings within a bottom-up system, organizing them into more abstract units (Creswell, 2007: 36-39). Qualitative research is a type of research in which theories and hypotheses are not formulated in advance, and the researcher, as the main instrument of the study, employs a descriptive and emergent approach in order to extract meanings from the research (Creswell, 2007: 195).

Qualitative research is a type of research in which theories and hypotheses are not formulated in advance, and the researcher, as the main instrument of the study, employs a descriptive and emergent approach in order to extract meanings from the research. Flick, in his qualitative studies on Instagram, while referring to the common perception of Instagram as a visual platform, emphasizes the importance of taking into account the "vernacular platform" in qualitative research, which includes the platform's rules and logic. He, while pointing to various research methods on Instagram, identifies the user study method as one of the research approaches, in which the researcher focuses on users who publish content about themselves (Chamberlain & Lynch, 2022: 924-930).

In this study, thematic analysis, as a type of qualitative research, has been used to analyze the pages of Iranian self-development microcelebrities.

Thematic analysis is a readily accessible method for developing and examining patterns within a set of qualitative data. Although various forms of thematic analysis have been proposed, what they all share is a commitment and interest in the meaningful patterns that are ultimately extracted from qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2022: 4). However, although thematic analysis is considered a method for analyzing and reporting patterns within qualitative data and is responsible for organizing and providing a detailed description of the data, it should not be regarded as limited solely to this descriptive dimension, since in many cases thematic analysis also addresses various aspects of the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 80). Compared to other qualitative methods, thematic analysis offers a degree of flexibility that allows the researcher to extract patterns without becoming entangled in complex epistemological commitments. In this regard, Braun and Clarke have proposed a six-phase framework for thematic analysis, which includes: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the report (Ahmed et al., 2025: 1).

The aim of mapping a thematic network in the process of thematic analysis is to facilitate the structuring and representation of themes, as

well as the transition from the analyzed text toward the researcher's interpretation of the text. The thematic network, which is visualized in the form of web-like maps, displays prominent themes at three levels, namely:

- **Basic themes** including the self-evident premises and obvious points present in the text under study.
- **Organizing themes** including themes that are formed in order to summarize the main principles or core elements of the work.
- **Global themes** including higher-order themes that represent the fundamental metaphors of the text, as a whole constructed within the research (Attride-Stirling, 2001: 387-388).

Given what has been discussed, eight Instagram pages of Iranian microcelebrities in the field of self-development have been selected, and the information from their Instagram pages is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Eight Instagram pages of Iranian microcelebrities in the field of self-development

Instagram Page ID	Username	Biography	Follower
arsaalanasadi	Arsalan/ Heavenly laws	The fulfillment of human dreams is the natural and obvious duty of the universe 🧞□□🔥 I am proudly monotheist 🌍✊🏾 Call me Arslan⑦□	2.1m
maralhanifiii	Maral Hanifi/ Feng Shui	The first specialized Feng Shui page in Iran 🥇 Here you learn techniques for attracting abundance and peace Over 80,000 students ❤️ Highlights full of tutorials Safety 🔐 @behteam 👇 Contact info	1.3m
Mohamadamin_bavandpour	Mohammadamin Bavandpour/ Mr. Luck	Start of the 51% discount on Midas Secret Team membership 🎊 Discounted price: 1,900 tomans Join through the link below 👇❤️ (This Bio refers to microcelebrity self-help package)	1.1M
Babakbahmankhah	Babak Bahmankhah | Self-confidence | Good mood	🎊 Good-vibes coach | 16 years of experience 💎 I help you make your inner state, your wallet, and your relationships amazing 🚀 "Reaching Your Dreams" course – free on the Telegram channel 👇	762K

Instagram Page ID	Username	Biography	Follower
avakhodadad	Ava Khodadad / My mission is to spread the light of awareness / Hypnosis	Ava Khodadad / Inner healing / Meditation / Hypnosis ✨ The great "Dalavish" miracle together with the "Tibetan abundance tablet" 🔐 Security: Behrouz Kamalian @behteam	525k
Romisa_iravani	Dr. Romisa Iravani, "Lady of Peace"	I'm a personal development coach and I love living joyfully 🤗 🌿 My lifestyle is based on positive psychology (meditation, hypnosis) If you stay with me, your lifestyle will change too 🙏	511K
mojezeepaki	Dr. Fatemeh Paki | Hypnosis	✨ The Miracle Lady of Iran With hypnotherapy, you can live your dreams For a free consultation, send a DM 📥	466K
fengshui.eskandari	Malakeh Yasin, Feng Shui and Astrology instructor	The first *Kawkab-therapy* reference in Iran with 18 years of experience Holder of an entrepreneurship certificate from the Ministry of Industry, Mines and Trade of Canada Healing with Yasin Read the 🔵 highlight to find out the cause of your problem	100k

The criteria for selecting these microcelebrities were having more than 300,000 followers and the consistency of their posts with the topic of personal development. All of the content on these microcelebrities' Instagram pages is devoted to teaching self-development methods.

In this research, a two-stage thematic analysis was used. In line with the approach mentioned by Flick in qualitative research on Instagram, first, the themes of each page were analyzed separately based on five purposefully selected posts. Then, in the second stage, a form of integrative thematic analysis was conducted across all these pages, which produced the final themes of this study.

4. Findings
In this study, we identified three global themes: pseudoscience, the primacy of luck and the inner self, and self-made rules. These themes are composed of 7 organizing themes and 31 basic themes (Table 2).

Table 2. Seven organizing themes and 31 basic themes base on pseudoscience, the primacy of luck and the inner self, and self-made rules.

	Example	Basic theme	Organizing theme	Global theme
1	Before the new year begins, in order to keep the moon's energy away from your life and prevent its effects on your life, you need to do a few things. One of the best things is to give charity, recite Ayat al-Kursi, and there's one very important point—write "moon" for me in the comments so I can teach it to you.	Combining religious knowledge with pseudoscience		
2	You take a 3×4 photo of yourself or your loved ones, put it inside a container, pour Himalayan salt over it… then make an intention for warding off negative energies and the evil eye, and perform this technique.	Pseudoscientific techniques for warding off the evil eye	Combining pseudoscience and religion	Pseudoscience
3	You must start this technique on Eid al-Fitr and do it for 21 days. Each day, you recite Surah Al-Falaq three times, Surah An-Naas three times, and Ayat al-Kursi[1] three times.	Combining religious knowledge and numerology for success		

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1. A 4dhikr (remembrance) whose recitation is emphasized in Islam

	Example	Basic theme	Organizing theme	Global theme
5	The second Friday of Khordad is the day of *Dahw al-Arz[1]*, meaning the birthday of the Earth, when this powerful portal opens again after a year… Be sure to send this post to your loved ones so they become aware of this energy portal and so that its good karma comes back to you.	Fusing religious phenomena and pseudoscience		
6	There are times in the year when it feels like God is closer than ever. The first ten days of Dhu al-Hijjah[2] are one of those times: ten golden days, ten days of opportunity, ten days of light. From today until the 16th of Khordad, the sky opens a golden portal for us... 🌟	Using religious holy days in the service of pseudoscience		
7	For this technique we need a glass container — it must not be plastic — and natural vinegar. When we place it, we recite Surah Al-Falaq and Surah An-Naas, intending it for repelling negative energy and cleansing negative energy.	Combining religion and pseudoscience for "positive energy" (مثبت)		

1. Dahw al-Arz is a belief in Islam meaning the spreading of the earth and the day on which the earth emerged from beneath the waters.
2. Last month of Lunar Calandar

	Example	Basic theme	Organizing theme	Global theme
8	On a big sheet of paper you write: *"I deserve money and wealth. Write: I deserve money and wealth. I am worthy."*	Becoming wealthy by writing symbols of wealth	Gaining wealth through pseudoscience	
9	Pomegranate, beetroot, and strawberries — these three red foods activate your money chakra. According to Ayurveda, the foods we eat strongly affect our level of vibration and frequency.	The effect of foods on wealth		
10	The clothes you wear have a direct connection with your being wealthy or broke and in poverty. When you stay attached to your old and worn-out clothes, it means you are staying attached to the energy of poverty.	The relationship between clothing and wealth		
11	Unaware of the fact that the source of wealth is in their very blood… A woman's womb is the center of Shakti energy, and Shakti energy is the same as the energy of abundance in the universe. The more a man pays attention to his wife, … these interactions strengthen feminine hormones and make the Shakti energy more powerful.	Linking wealth to the energy of women's wombs		
12	If your shoes pile up in front of the door for a long time, they block the way for good energy to enter the house, and this unintentionally brings you bad luck.	The effect of household objects on luck	Pseudoscience and human success	
13	The kings of old used the science of astrology to determine the exact date of every deal or action, and that's why they made fewer mistakes and were more successful.	The influence of the stars on success		
14	To remove poverty and distress from your life, you draw a circle known as a "protective circle" or "energy circle." Inside it, you	The influence of pseudoscientific		

	Example	Basic theme	Organizing theme	Global theme
	write the numbers 7, 4, 7, 6, 6, which in Abjad numerology are equivalent to the dhikr 74, "Dalil"[1] 76, or "Mobdel"[2] 66, i.e. "Ya Allah." Then you write your mother's name at the bottom of the paper.	talismans on success		
15	If you also want your year to be full of blessings, for your work and business to flourish like gold coins, and to be protected from the evil eye and misfortune, do what I did and saw results from… Place as many eggs as the number of your family members, take them out of the house and give them away as a gift or as charity. And after that, use both lentils and rice and lentils… They would always use coins as well so that their work would "turn into coins" for a whole year; they would put them in an open container and keep it in the house until the following year.	The influence of Feng Shui on success		
16	The secret behind the strange number with which Putin went from his father's house — a house that didn't even have a water tap — all the way to the Russian presidential building. This number is so important to him that when he has an important meeting, he even measures the number of his steps to the chair according to it.	The use of lucky numbers by prominent figures		
17	When you want to get *your number*, you first have to convert your birthdate to the Gregorian (Miladi) calendar and write it down on a piece of paper. Then we add up the numbers for the day, the month, and the year separately. If any of them becomes a two-digit number, we add those digits together until we get a single digit. In the end, you'll have three single-digit numbers. Then you add those three numbers together to get one final number.	The effect of a lucky number on an individual's future	The effect of a lucky number on success	The primacy of the inner self and luck
18	"Which surah brings me luck? Definitely Surah An-Nur. If I'm	The impact of luck on		

1. One of the names of Allah in Islam means "the Cause."
2. One of the names of Allah in Islam means "the Transformer."

	Example	Basic theme	Organizing theme	Global theme
	only looking for a promotion and career advancement, which surah should I recite? Only Surah Al-Anfal."	success		
19	Ali Ansarian[1] said, "I want to die before my mother." Before that, Azadeh Namdari's[2] mother said, "I don't want to see the age of 40" — and she didn't. But neither of them had the slightest idea that they were in a state of *ijabah* — that special moment when whatever you utter as a prayer is granted.	The effect of inner mindset on external events		
20	One day you'll realize that no one is coming to save you— not love, not family, not the world. That's the day your life truly starts over.	The ineffectiveness of the family in one's life		
21	One day you wake up and realize that all the things you were chasing—like validation, love, and peace—were never outside of you. You yourself are both the savior and the wounded.	Love and peace as inner phenomena		
22	ou realize you have to hold yourself—with all your mistakes, with all your broken pieces— and understand that you don't have to be perfect to be lovable.	The human being as their own sole saviour	Attention focused solely inward	
23	You then realize that freedom isn't changing the world— it's changing your own perspective. The greatest victory is making peace with yourself, and the greatest faith is trusting your path.	Disregard for external social relations/conditions		
24	Let go—because you're not the owner of the world. The biggest enemy of your peace is thinking everything has to be under your control. Let God be the director; you just play your part in His script.	Liberation from the external world		
	It's the nature of the mind: if it is calm and under your control, naturally the whole world will be drawn toward you — even the universe will come under your command.	The influence of the mind on the external world		

1. An Iranian famous Football player and TV presenter
2. An Iranian Famous TV Presenter

	Example	**Basic theme**	**Organizing theme**	**Global theme**
25	Surrender yourself to Him. The greatest peace comes when you understand that you are not responsible for the results, only for the effort. Leave the rest to Him.	Detachment from responsibility for outcomes		
26	A very powerful *dhikr* (mention) for increasing wealth, sustenance, and divinely blessed provision, which I myself have used and am still using; it will untie your financial knots.	Personal *dhikr* (mention)for wealth	Personalized Dhikrs (mentions)	
27	After you wake up from sleep — no matter what time, where, or how — wash your hands and face, stare into your own eyes in the mirror, and tell yourself five of your positive qualities.	Personal *dhikr* (mention) for success		
28	This exercise requires at least 14 days of consistency in repeating this *dhikr* 50 times. Before you go to sleep, you close your eyes and repeat to yourself: "Every day, I am becoming wealthier and wealthier."	Defining the duration of continuity/practice		**Self-made rules**
29	Just once a day, for 21 days, you perform ablution (wudu) and recite Surah Al-Fatiha. Whether you read it in Arabic or in Persian, the result will amaze you so much that right now, as you're watching me, you'll say: "Come on, this one's crazy too!"	Adding self-made rules to religious practices	Personalized relations	
30	If you don't have peace, it's because you've never followed these four principles in your life: 1. Let go — you're not the owner of the world. 2. For just five minutes a day, sit down and be silent. 3. Turn your pain into worship. 4. Surrender yourself to Him.	Personal rules for peace of mind		
31	I want to share three powerful mantras with all of you, and if you repeat these three powerful mantras with faith and heartfelt belief behind them, they will transform your life.	Personal mantra for success		

4.1. Pseudoscience

One of the most frequently recurring elements in the thematic analysis of the pages of self-development microcelebrities is the concept of pseudoscience and its use in various domains as a means of achieving personal development. In this analysis, pseudoscience is treated as an important concept and is regarded as a tool for attaining success, one that encompasses multiple spheres and can supposedly be used to achieve success. As discussed in the conceptual framework, pseudoscience in itself covers a range of different fields, which will be further examined in the continuation of the analysis.

- **Fusion of pseudoscience and religion**

One of the organizing themes in this study is the use of religion and its instrumentalization alongside pseudoscience. The use of religious concepts—from religious rituals to religious recommendations and similar elements—appears in the pages of these microcelebrities in such a way that it also draws in a religious audience. In other words, in addition to influencing an audience already inclined toward pseudoscience and potentially attracting existing believers in pseudoscientific ideas, they also gain access—through religious concepts—to a new type of audience that believes in, is committed to, and abides by religious practices.

- **Gaining wealth through pseudoscience**

This theme indicates that audiences are told they can gain access to wealth and become rich by adopting a set of pseudoscientific methods. In this approach, they are not taught how to run a business or succeed economically; rather, they are confronted with a series of non-scientific methods that, from a scientific standpoint, have no real connection to wealth acquisition. For example, within this theme, microcelebrities claim that the colors people wear, or even the fruits they eat, can influence specific "wealth chakras" in the body and thereby make them wealthy.

- **Pseudoscience and human success**

At the semantic level, this theme is closely related to "gaining wealth through pseudoscience," with the difference that "success" here is treated as a broader concept. In this theme, without clarifying what exactly counts as success, microcelebrities simply teach their audiences a set of pseudo-scientifically inspired teachings and claim that, if audiences strictly adhere to them, they will definitely become successful. These recommendations become particularly significant in light of the fact that there is no clear criterion for evaluating them—that is, no concrete standard for measuring human success—yet the guaranteed outcome of following these instructions is still presented as something called "success."

4.2. Primacy of luck and the inner self

What is evident in this theme is the separation of the individual from

the social world. In this constructed world, where the individual is given priority, a person can achieve their desires without engaging in social interactions or navigating social relations. What stands out most in this thematic world is the positioning of the self as the center of existence and of all events within it.

- **The effect of elements of luck on success**

In this theme, the audience is confronted with a collection of elements and symbols. From the microcelebrities' perspective, anything that is framed as a symbol or element of luck can become the cause of major positive changes in the lives of their followers. For example, at this stage numbers become important; certain numbers are believed to bring more luck than others for followers, and if the audience uses these numbers in their daily lives, they are told they will witness positive events in their life.

- **Attention focused solely on the self**

In this theme, microcelebrities invite their audience to understand everything within themselves, in a way that requires this group of followers to cut themselves off from the outside world—that is, the social world, including family, friends, and the groups they are connected with. What matters here is solely the individual, who is portrayed with exaggerated abilities and shown as someone who can, on their own, overcome all problems and reach a higher status. The world depicted in this theme is one in which others do not necessarily have a positive impact on the individual's life; rather, others are often portrayed as a consistently negative force that holds the person back from prog

4.3. Self-made rules

In this theme, microcelebrities introduce various kinds of "rules" to their audience that have no identifiable source—neither scientific nor non-scientific, nor even from other references such as mythological or religious sources. Rather, the only creators and originators of these rules are the microcelebrities themselves. They state that these rules have worked for them and have had an impact on their own lives, and claim that such rules are in fact universal laws they have "discovered." They then share these laws with their audience in a coded or secretive way.

- **Personalized dhikr (prayers)**

One type of self-made rule is the introduction of personalized dhikr or phrases that microcelebrities present as impactful codes for their followers' lives. These dhikr are not derived from any established source. In fact, these prayers and phrases have no religious, scientific, or even mythological precedent; rather, the microcelebrities themselves invent or "discover" them, believing that these words can influence life. Although some of these dhikr may closely resemble religious concepts, the important point is that the microcelebrity has reconstructed them in their own language and introduced them to the audience. For example,

followers are told to stand in front of the mirror upon waking and say a few powerful traits about themselves.

- **Personalized relations**

This aspect of personal development, introduced by microcelebrities, also stems from a kind of ritual or practice that has not been mentioned in any prior source. In this section, microcelebrities present numbers to their audience to follow for certain practices and believe that they must adhere to these numbers to see the effects in their lives. For example, they might say, "This practice should be repeated for at least 14 days, 50 times daily. Before going to sleep, close your eyes and repeat to yourself: 'Every day, I am becoming wealthier and wealthier.'" However, this behavior and theme are largely borrowed and copied from religious practices; just as in Islam, it is said that one must fast for 30 days or circle the Kaaba seven times.

5. Conclusion

As digital tools moved into the center of social and economic activity, they changed routines that once seemed fixed, expanding the reach of personal relationships and allowing information to move faster than traditional institutions can keep up with (Salehi et al., 2025). Social media are not merely tools for interaction but have evolved into powerful socio-technical systems that mediate experience, shape perceptions of reality, and play a central role in the organization of contemporary life (Lombardo et al., 2021; Moghaddam & Shahghasemi, 2025). In the content shared by Iranian self-development microcelebrities, a kind of exaggerated or hyper-individualized self is represented and recommended as a model for life. The Instagram pages of Iranian self-help microcelebrities can be broadly summarized as spaces where recommendations are shared in which the individual self is portrayed as the sole actor. This self is held responsible for everything, and accordingly, followers are taught sets of instructions in which only they themselves are involved; no other person or the wider society takes part. As a result, we witness a removal of any meaningful role for society and the state. These teachings and recommendations can be grouped into individually performed pseudoscientific practices, the training of an inner, superior self and luck as a key factor in life, and rules invented by the microcelebrities themselves that must be enacted within the private sphere of followers. In all of the above components, the actions and behaviors depicted are such that no specific "other" is involved in carrying them out.

The recommendations published on the pages of Iranian self-help microcelebrities are generally low-cost, and at the same time, all the costs—especially economic and financial—are directed toward the individual alone; no one else is implicated. These costs typically relate to the follower's personal consumption, such as using particular colors, specific types of clothing, or similar items in order to attain wealth or

other forms of success, and thus they steer followers toward a kind of consumerism. Ultimately, these instructions lead to the emergence of a form of spurious spirituality among followers—one that is not rooted in any particular religion or tradition, but effectively functions as a new religion in order to soothe them. In this newly fabricated and self-made "religion", they are invited to perform acts that are modeled on the *form* of religious practices—including those found in Abrahamic religions—for instance, calling on followers to repeat a certain act a specific number of times or over a fixed period. However, the *content* of these acts is entirely new and corresponds to what this article has termed "self-made rules".

Consistent with the ideals of neoliberal societies—where individuals are conceived as isolated, self-governing units—the content of these Instagram pages places primary emphasis on the inner self, while the individual's outward, social identity is rendered largely irrelevant. External society is frequently portrayed as an impediment to personal growth, and success is framed as an internal "code" accessible only through self-exploration and self-regulation. Within this discourse, the individual is positioned as their own sole savior, with repeated assertions that one should expect nothing from others. Instead, followers are urged to turn inward, as the path to success is believed to lie entirely within the self. This framework universalizes personal responsibility, recasting all problems—regardless of their social or political origins—as issues resolvable through internal transformation. Even when structural injustices are implicitly acknowledged, solutions are consistently individualized, with audiences encouraged to "change themselves deeply" in order to effect broader change. Moreover, the success promised in this paradigm is neither externally verifiable nor clearly defined, which renders evaluation impossible. Without measurable outcomes or shared criteria, followers are unable to assess the efficacy of their efforts—effectively removing any basis for holding the microcelebrities accountable for their claims or guidance.

Conflict of interest
The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations
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