Article

The Authentic Self Is the Self-Enhancing Self: A Self-Enhancement Framework of Authenticity

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Corey L. Guenther[1], Yiyue Zhang[2], and Constantine Sedikides[3]

Abstract

Authenticity refers to behaving in a manner that aligns with one's true self. The true self, though, is positive. From a self-enhancement standpoint, people exaggerate their strengths and overlook their shortcomings, forming positively-distorted views of themselves. We propose a self-enhancement framework of authenticity, advocating a reciprocal relation between the two constructs. Trait self-enhancement was associated with higher trait authenticity (Study 1), and day-to-day fluctuations in self-enhancement predicted corresponding variations in state authenticity (Study 2). Furthermore, manipulating self-enhancement elevated state authenticity (Studies 3–4), which was associated with meaning in life (Study 4), and manipulating authenticity augmented self-enhancement, which was associated with meaning in life and thriving (Study 5). The authentic self is largely the self-enhancing self.

Keywords

authenticity, self-enhancement, better-than-average effect, well-being, meaning

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From Aristotle (1985) through humanistic inquiry (Maslow, 1962; Rogers, 1961) and the positive psychology movement (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Seligman, 2002) to popular culture (Dillard, 2016; Nadrich, 2019), authenticity has been depicted as central to human experience and life fulfillment. We take a critical look at the construct and interrogate its relation to self-enhancement. In doing so, we propose a bidirectional self-enhancement framework of authenticity, such that self-enhancement elicits authenticity, and authenticity strengthens self-enhancement.

Conceptualizations of Authenticity

Authenticity is defined as being true to oneself (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2018; Sedikides et al., 2019). To be authentic, one must allow their behavior to reflect a spontaneous expression of the self and must live in a way that conveys their actual characteristics and desires (Maslow, 1971). Inauthenticity, by contrast, implies "acting in ways that are not the real me or my true self" (Harter et al., 1996, p. 360).

Authenticity is further differentiated as trait and state (Sedikides et al., 2017). According to a multicomponent framework of trait authenticity (Kernis & Goldman, 2006), living authentically involves (a) awareness of one's strengths, weaknesses, goals, and aspirations; (b) engaging in unbiased processing of self-relevant information (i.e., accepting both positive and negative feedback); (c) behaving consistently with one's values, standards, and preferences (i.e., not behaving falsely in the service of appeasing external influence); and (d) striving for relational openness, genuineness, and truthfulness in one's close relationships. Other conceptualizations similarly emphasize authentic living as acting in accordance with one's true self and as exhibiting awareness and acceptance of one's attributes (Knoll et al., 2015; Wood et al., 2008).

State authenticity is the transient sense of being true to one's self (Sedikides et al., 2017). States are associated with cognitions, emotions, or actions in a particular situation (Fleeson, 2001) and are construed as relatively short-lived (Fridhandler, 1986). For example, individuals may experience state authenticity when they uphold their personal values in ambiguous situations (Erickson, 1995), engage in

[1]Creighton University, Omaha, NE, USA
[2]Ohio University, Athens, OH, USA
[3]University of Southampton, UK

Corresponding Author:
Corey L. Guenther, Department of Psychological Science, Creighton University, 2500 California Plaza, Omaha, NE 68178, USA.
Email: coreyguenther@creighton.edu

familiar activities (Lenton, Bruder, et al., 2013), or perceive their goal strivings are congruent with their values (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998).

State authenticity is positively related to trait authenticity (Lenton, Bruder, et al., 2013), and trait authenticity can be conceptualized as an accumulation of discernible state authenticity episodes (Nezlek, 2007). However, the two constructs correlate only modestly, as trait authenticity does not necessarily predict state authenticity in a given situation (Lenton, Bruder, et al., 2013). For example, people feel more authentic when behaving agreeably and conscientiously even when they are not dispositionally agreeable or conscientious (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010).

Eliciting Authenticity: Self-Awareness or Self-Enhancement?

To infer they are authentic, it has been argued (Kernis & Goldman, 2006) that people must know who they really are. However, people are often unaware of their psychological states (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), and introspection or self-awareness is not necessarily the optimal path to self-knowledge (Wilson & Dunn, 2004). Relatedly, self-evaluation—especially on personally-important (or central) attributes—is marked by considerable, if not excessive, self-positivity (i.e., self-enhancement effect; Alicke et al., 2013; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008), typically the result of "striving to preserve or augment the favorability of one's self-views" (i.e., self-enhancement motive; Sedikides, 2020, p. 251). For example, people prefer feedback that informs their strengths rather than weaknesses (Kunda, 1990), even when the feedback source is identical (Sedikides et al., 2016). They also believe they are better than average on important dimensions (Zell et al., 2020) and evaluate their abilities based on peak performances rather than objective base-rate averages (Guenther et al., 2015). Moreover, people are often unaware of their biased self-evaluations (Gregg et al., 2011): They are willing to bet money that their better-than-average views are correct (Williams & Gilovich, 2008) and opine that others are more likely to fall victims to self-enhancement than themselves (Pronin et al., 2002). Self-enhancement has been documented in both Western and Eastern cultures (Sedikides et al., 2015) and predicts well-being (Dufner et al., 2019).

Given the robustness with which self-evaluation is marked by self-enhancement, we advance a bidirectional self-enhancement framework of authenticity. We propose that people feel authentic when they self-enhance, and people self-enhance when they feel authentic. Proclivities toward authentic living and heightened authenticity, then, will be evident when self-views are marked by self-enhancement, and self-enhancement will be evident when people feel like their true selves.

We focus on self-enhancement as an antecedent to and consequence of subjective rather than objective authenticity (Rivera et al., 2019). Subjective authenticity refers to whether one feels as though they act in accordance with their true self (Kelley et al., 2022; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Lenton, Bruder, et al., 2013; Wood et al., 2008). Objective authenticity refers to whether the true self guides one's behaviors, goals, and decision-making (Maslow, 1962; Rogers, 1961). Subjective authenticity and its implications for well-being have been gaining momentum in the personality and social psychological literature (Chen, 2019; Rivera et al., 2019; Sedikides et al., 2019; Sutton, 2020).

Authenticity and Self-Enhancement: Suggestive Evidence

There is suggestive evidence for the self-enhancement framework of authenticity. Authenticity is often associated with positive personality characteristics and behaviors instead of accurate self-reflections. For example, trait authenticity has been linked to higher self-esteem (Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Lenton, Bruder, et al., 2013; Lenton et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2008) across several cultures (China, India, Singapore, the United States; Slabu et al., 2014). Also, trait authenticity is positively associated with social desirability (Toper et al., 2022), an index of self-enhancement (Dufner et al., 2019). Moreover, trait authenticity arises in positive or socially desirable situations. In one study (Sheldon et al., 1997), genuineness and self-expressiveness were linked with positive ratings on Big Five personality traits: Participants reported feeling most authentic in social roles in which they perceived themselves as more extroverted, agreeable, conscientious, open to experience, and non-neurotic.

In addition, state authenticity is positively associated with self-esteem in daily reports (Heppner et al., 2008) and is tethered to the positive self. In one study (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2016), participants imagined themselves resolving moral dilemmas in ways that were congruent with their personal desires, goals, and characteristics. Participants viewed their hypothetical behaviors as more authentic when these behaviors represented morally superior (rather than inferior) options despite all behaviors being consistent with participants' self-reported characteristics. A similar finding emerged when participants recalled actual behaviors: Positive behaviors were perceived as more authentic than negative ones, even when all behaviors were congruent with participants' self-reported characteristics. Other studies have documented parallel effects. For example, self-compassion, a positive personality trait, increases state authenticity regardless of dispositional self-compassion (J. W. Zhang et al., 2019), and state authenticity is induced by favorable acts such as upholding personal values (Smallenbroek et al., 2017) or behaving morally (Christy et al., 2016).

Finally, individuals construe their true selves as essentially good and moral (Newman et al., 2014). They believe their true selves guide them to behave virtuously (Newman et al., 2015) and perceive their own authentic selves as more positive and

moral than others' (Zhang & Alicke, 2021). Likewise, children believe their positive (vs. negative) traits reflect more of their authentic selves (Harter, 2002). The relation between perceptions of moral goodness and true self-knowledge is reciprocal: Individuals report reduced self-knowledge when they are reminded of their immoral behaviors and feel they know more about the true selves of highly moral targets (Christy et al., 2016). Taken together, there is preliminary evidence for a link between self-enhancement and authenticity at trait and state levels. The search for true self knowledge appears to be guided by positivity more than accuracy.

Overview

We report five studies testing the self-enhancement framework of authenticity. We hypothesize that trait self-enhancement is positively associated with trait authenticity (Study 1) and that day-to-day fluctuations in self-enhancement predict corresponding variations in state authenticity (Study 2). Furthermore, we hypothesize a causal link between self-enhancement and authenticity, such that self-enhancement elevates state authenticity (Studies 3–4), which in turn is associated with higher well-being (meaning in life [MIL]; Study 4). Finally, we hypothesize a causal relation between authenticity and self-enhancement, such that authenticity increases self-enhancement, which in turn is related to higher well-being (MIL and thriving; Study 5).

All studies were approved by the institutional review board of the pertinent university. We report all measures and preregistered Studies 4–5. Data, codes, and stimulus materials are on the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/ep3xn/?view_only=a8c57d2f3b744e8ca7e5c1208f71ff19).

Study 1

In Study 1, we tested the hypothesis that self-enhancement and authenticity are positively related at the trait level. We made no hypotheses regarding variation in correlation strength across authenticity subscales.

Method

Participants. We recruited an opportunistic sample of 185 Creighton University undergraduates (80 women, 65 men, 40 unknown due to a recording error; no age information). A sensitivity analysis (G*Power 3.1; Faul et al., 2009) indicated that 185 participants would yield 80% power to detect a small-to-medium effect ($\rho = .20$, assuming $\alpha = .05$). We did not collect racial/ethnic data in Studies 1 to 3; however, in the relevant institution, 70% of undergraduates are White, 8% Asian, 10% Hispanic/Latino, 2% Black, 6% multiple races, 2% non-residents, and 1% race unspecified.

Procedure. Participants responded—in individual cubicles—to three questionnaires. They completed a dispositional authenticity measure and two (blocked) self-enhancement measures in random order, with the order of the self-enhancement measures counterbalanced.

Self-Enhancement. The first measure pertained to the better-than-average effect (BTAE), a key indicator of self-enhancement (Sedikides & Alicke, 2019; Zell et al., 2020) that has been employed in research on individual differences in self-enhancement and correlates with other indicators of it (Taylor et al., 2003). Specifically, we used the How I See Myself Questionnaire (HSM; Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995) to assess whether participants perceived themselves as superior to their peers. Participants evaluated themselves relative to a same-gender/age peer at their university on 22 items reflecting traits and skills, 11 of which were positive (e.g., "sensitive to others," "academically able") and 11 negative (e.g., "anxious," "manipulative"). Responses ranged from 1 (*much worse than the average college student of my age and gender*) to 7 (*much better than*). We computed the BTAE by averaging ratings across items ($\alpha = .76$).

The second measure was narcissism, also a key indicator of self-enhancement (Gebauer et al., 2017; Grijalva & Zhang, 2016), with individual differences in narcissism correlating positively with other self-enhancement indicators (Dufner et al., 2019). Specifically, we used the Narcissistic Personality Inventory-16 (NPI-16; Ames et al., 2006). Each of its 16 items constituted a pair of statements. For each pair, one statement exemplified the narcissistic response (e.g., "I am an extraordinary person"), and the other, the non-narcissistic response (e.g., "I am much like everybody else"). Participants chose between the two statements. We added the number of narcissistic statements chosen ($\alpha = .69$) to yield a narcissism index. Given that narcissism is marked by excessive self-positivity that is objectively unwarranted (Sedikides, 2021a), examining the relation between narcissism and authenticity offers a stringent test of whether authenticity reflects veridical self-perception or self-enhancement.

Authenticity. Participants completed the Trait Authenticity Inventory (AI-3; Kernis & Goldman, 2006). It comprises 45 items referring to the abovementioned four authenticity components. The relevant subscales are awareness (12 items; e.g., "I actively attempt to understand myself as best as possible"), unbiased processing (10 items; e.g., "I am very uncomfortable objectively considering my limitations and shortcomings" [reverse-scored]), behaving consistently (11 items; e.g., "I rarely, if ever, put on a "false face" for others to see"), and relational orientation (12 items; e.g., "If asked, people I am close to can accurately describe what kind of person I am"; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). We computed indices for each component by averaging responses to items within the relevant subscale (awareness $\alpha = .82$; unbiased processing $\alpha = .66$; behavior consistency $\alpha = .63$; relational orientation $\alpha = .62$) and computed the trait authenticity index by averaging responses across all items ($\alpha = .86$).

Table 1. Correlations Between Better-Than-Average Beliefs (HSM), Narcissism (NPI-16), and Trait Authenticity (AI-3 Plus Subscales) in Study 1.

Measure	HSM	NPI-16	AI-3	Unbiased processing	Awareness processing	Behavioral consistency	Relational orientation
1. HSM	—						
2. NPI-16	.32**	—					
3. AI-3	.45**	.23*	—				
4. Unbiased processing	.28**	.26**	.65**	—			
5. Awareness	.47**	.20*	.85**	.40**	—		
6. Behavioral consistency	.32**	.21*	.82**	.43**	.61**	—	
7. Relational orientation	.29**	.003	.71**	.23*	.51**	.51**	—

Note. HSM = How I See Myself Questionnaire; NPI-16 = Narcissistic Personality Inventory-16; AI-3 = Authenticity Inventory.
*$p < .01$. **$p < .001$.

Results and Discussion

We hypothesized a positive link between self-enhancement and authenticity. We correlated scores on each self-enhancement measure—the HSM and NPI-16—with overall scores on the AI-3 and scores on each of the AI-3 subscales[1] (Table 1).

The BTAE was positively related to authenticity, $r(173) = .45$, $p < .001$, and each sub-component of it. Perceiving oneself as better than average was linked to a greater proclivity to regard oneself as more aware of one's strengths and weaknesses, $r(180) = .47$, $p < .001$; unbiased in self-evaluation, $r(180) = .28$, $p < .001$; behaving consistently with one's internal world, $r(177) = .32$, $p < .001$; and having a genuine relational orientation, $r(178) = .29$, $p < .001$. Also, narcissism was positively associated with trait authenticity, $r(175) = .23$, $p = .002$, and three authenticity sub-components: awareness, $r(182) = .20$, $p = .006$; unbiased processing, $r(182) = .26$, $p < .001$; and behaving consistently, $r(179) = .21$, $p = .004$. These results support the self-enhancement/authenticity framework.

Study 2

In Study 2, we sought an ecologically valid test of the association between self-enhancement and authenticity. Participants completed measures of self-enhancement and authenticity for seven consecutive days. We hypothesized that participants would experience greater authenticity on days when they self-enhanced more.

Method

Participants. We followed the sampling plan of studies that used a similar daily-diary design (Evans et al., 2022; Lenton et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2019) aiming to test at least 100 participants, a typical sample size in daily-diary research (Ohly et al., 2010). We tested 123 Creighton University undergraduates. We excluded two for completing only one survey, leaving an $N = 121$ (77 women, 43 men, 1 non-binary). Their age ranged from 18 to 25 years ($M = 18.93$, $SD = 1.04$). Of them, 96.7% completed at least five surveys totaling 799 responses.

Procedure. In a pre-session, we invited participants to the laboratory (in groups of up to 14) explaining the study requirements. We collected the data on Qualtrics. For seven consecutive days, participants received a link (via email) to a survey that contained measures of state self-enhancement and authenticity (in random order). We distributed the surveys at late afternoon with instructions to be returned before midnight.

Self-Enhancement. Participants completed a BTAE measure wherein they made in-the-moment comparative ratings on five high-importance traits (Brown, 2012). Specifically, they rated themselves in comparison to the average same-gender/age peer at their institution on honesty, kindness, responsibility, intelligence, and competence (1 = *considerably below average*, 5 = *average*, 9 = *considerably above average*). Each item was preceded by the stem "Right now" (e.g., "Right now, how would you rate your competence compared to the average student"). All ratings were made on a slider scale that recorded evaluations to two decimal points: The slide bar defaulted to the scale midpoint ("average") to begin each rating, and participants adjusted the bar as needed to reflect their comparative self-judgments that day. We computed a daily self-enhancement index by averaging comparative ratings across items each day.

Authenticity. Participants completed the four-item Southampton Authenticity Scale (Kelley et al., 2022; e.g., Right now, "I feel like the real me"; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*). We computed a daily authenticity index by averaging ratings across items each day.

Results and Discussion

To account for the nested nature of the data (days within people), we used linear mixed modeling examining whether

self-enhancement predicted authenticity across days. We centered daily self-enhancement on each participant's mean state self-enhancement score across the entirety of the study. This within-subjects approach allowed us to test whether day-to-day deviations above or below each participant's typical level of self-enhancement predicted systematic changes in felt authenticity. Intercepts varied, whereas slopes were fixed.

Daily self-enhancement predicted daily authenticity: On days when participants self-enhanced more, they reported higher authenticity, $b = .38$, $SE = .04$, $t = 9.80$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.31, .46]. This finding replicates and extends Study 1 by providing ecologically valid evidence for the hypothesis that self-enhancement is associated with heightened authenticity.

Furthermore, in a lagged analysis, we found that yesterday's self-enhancement predicted today's authenticity, $b = .72$, $SE = .01$, $t = 70.23$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.70, .74], even after controlling for yesterday's authenticity, $b = .22$, $SE = .02$, $t = 9.44$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.18, .27]. Interestingly, yesterday's authenticity also predicted today's self-enhancement, $b = .19$, $SE = .04$, $t = 5.16$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.12, .26], and continued to do so after controlling for yesterday's self-enhancement, $b = .11$, $SE = .03$, $t = 3.54$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.05, .17], although the strength of this relation was weaker. These findings offer preliminary evidence for the bidirectional relation between self-enhancement and authenticity.

Study 3

In Studies 1 and 2, we obtained a positive relation between self-enhancement and authenticity. In Study 3, we tested this relation causally. Participants completed a personality assessment and received favorable or unfavorable feedback along dimensions that differed on personal importance. Self-enhancement concerns most prominently influence self-evaluations on personally important domains (Gebauer et al., 2013; Sedikides et al., 2016), and so we expected that authenticity would be most influenced by feedback favorability on high-importance trait dimensions. We hypothesized that participants who received favorable (vs. unfavorable) feedback on important (vs. unimportant) traits would report greater authenticity.

Method

Participants. A power analysis (G*Power 3.1; Faul et al., 2009) indicated that 274 participants would yield 80% power to detect a small to medium effect ($f = .17$, assuming $\alpha = .05$). We recruited 275 Creighton University undergraduates (184 women, 90 men, 1 prefer not to answer), aged from 17 to 24 years ($M = 18.81$, $SD = .88$).

Procedure. Participants completed the study—ostensibly their university's effort to understand student personality profiles—in individual cubicles. First, they filled out the 44-item Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999), advertised as one of the most accurate and widely used personality inventories. Next, participants were randomly assigned to receive (bogus) favorable or unfavorable feedback regarding their standing relative to same-university peers on six traits, three of which were of high importance (e.g., honest, kind, responsible) and three of low importance (outgoing, imaginative, agreeable; Brown, 2012), controlling for the favorability of feedback within a given category (high vs. low importance). Hence, the design comprised a 2 (high importance traits: favorable vs. unfavorable feedback) $\times$ 2 (low importance traits: favorable vs. unfavorable feedback) design yielding four conditions: favorable feedback on high-importance traits/favorable feedback on low-importance traits ($n = 71$); favorable feedback on high-importance traits/unfavorable feedback on low-importance traits ($n = 67$); unfavorable feedback on high-importance traits/favorable feedback on low-importance traits ($n = 61$); unfavorable feedback on high-importance traits/unfavorable feedback on low-importance traits ($n = 76$).

When assigned to receive favorable feedback, participants learned that they scored between the 92nd and 97th percentile on each of the three traits in the relevant category (high vs. low importance). When assigned to receive unfavorable feedback, participants learned that they scored between the 27th and 32nd percentile on each of the three traits in the relevant category. We displayed feedback on a screen one trait dimension at a time, in random order for each participant, for a minimum of 12 seconds (see Appendix for an example), after which participants elected when to advance to additional feedback. Finally, participants completed the same state authenticity measure as in Study 2 ($\alpha = .89$).

Results and Discussion

We present descriptive statistics in Table 2. A 2 $\times$ 2 analysis of variance (ANOVA) yielded a significant main effect of high-importance feedback on authenticity, $F(1, 271) = 7.89$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .028$. Participants receiving favorable feedback on high-importance traits ($M = 4.92$, $SD = .85$) evinced greater authenticity than those receiving unfavorable feedback on high-importance traits ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.14$). Neither the main effect of low-importance feedback, $F(1, 271) = .25$, $p = .621$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, nor the high- versus low-importance feedback interaction, $F(1, 271) = .30$, $p = .585$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, was significant. Consistent with our theoretical framework, receipt of favorable (vs. unfavorable) feedback—particularly in personally-important trait domains—increased authenticity, even though both types of feedback purportedly offered objective insight into one's strengths and weaknesses.[2] Self-enhancing accuracy, not simply accuracy per se, is more paramount to the emergence of authenticity.

Study 4

In pre-registered Study 4 (https://aspredicted.org/VKP_N3J), we tested the replicability of Study 3's finding that self-enhancement augments authenticity. More importantly,

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for State Authenticity as a Function of Feedback and Importance in Study 3.

	High-importance traits	
Low-importance traits	Favorable feedback	Unfavorable feedback
Favorable feedback	4.92 (.80)	4.64 (.96)
Unfavorable feedback	4.93 (.90)	4.52 (1.27)

Note. $N = 275$. Standard deviations are in the parentheses.

we extended Study 3 in four ways. First, we used a different self-enhancement manipulation and measure of authenticity. Second, we evaluated an alternative explanation for the Study 3 results. It is possible that providing self-enhancing feedback on high-importance traits elevated positive affect (Sedikides & Strube, 1997), which may have increased authenticity (Lenton, Slabu, et al., 2013). Third, we examined exploratorily whether temporal orientation moderates the relation between self-enhancement and authenticity. People construe their future self more favorably than their past or current self (Guenther & Zhang, 2022; Preuss & Alicke, 2017). Also, they may regard their future self as more authentic than their current self (Lenton, Bruder, et al., 2013; Seto & Schlegel, 2018). Thus, we examined whether self-enhancing with a future orientation (vs. past orientation) would more strongly impact authenticity. Finally, we tested whether augmenting authenticity via self-enhancement has downstream consequences on a well-being indicator, MIL. Prior research has linked both self-enhancement (Abeyta et al., 2017; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011) and authenticity (Sedikides et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2008) to higher MIL. We tested, then, whether elevated authenticity is one mechanism by which self-enhancement improves well-being.

Method

Participants. A power analysis (G*Power 3.1; Faul et al., 2009) indicated that 351 participants would yield 80% power to detect a small to medium effect ($f = .15$, assuming $\alpha = .05$). We recruited 361 U.S.-based Prolific workers for $.85(85cents). After excluding one participant whose responses to two attention-check items were below the scale median, the final sample comprised 360 participants (159 women, 181 men, 9 non-binary individuals, 2 transgender women, 9 unspecified) ranging in age from 18 to 79 years ($M = 37.35$, $SD = 14.38$). Of them, 77.78% were White, 5.00% Black, 11.67% Asian, 0.56% Hawaiian, 0.56% Middle Eastern, 2.50% mixed race, and 1.93% race unspecified. We used a 2 (self-reflection: enhanced vs. diminished) × 2 (time orientation: past vs. future self) between-subjects design, randomly assigning participants to conditions.

Procedure and Measures. We adapted the manipulation after O'Mara et al. (2012). In the enhanced-future condition, participants wrote about an imagined future occasion where they would show a much higher level of caring, understanding, or kindness than they had now. The instructions for the diminished-future condition were similar, except participants wrote about an imagined occasion where they would show a much lower level of caring, understanding, or kindness than they had now. The protocol for the enhanced-past and diminished-past conditions was similar, except that participants recalled past occasions. Next, all participants completed a manipulation check and the dependent measures.

Self-Enhancement Manipulation Check. Participants provided self-evaluations on 15 high-importance traits (Brown, 2012; e.g., competent, honest, trustworthy; 1 = *lowest level*, 7 = *highest level*). Past-oriented participants rated their past selves, whereas future-oriented participants rated their future selves ("rate the amount of each trait you believe you have [had] when imagining [recalling] this situation"). We averaged ratings across items to form a self-enhancement index ($\alpha = .94$).

Authenticity. Participants completed a three-item state authenticity measure ("Thinking about this situation makes me feel that . . ." "I am authentic"; Kifer et al., 2013; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). We averaged responses across items to create an authenticity index ($\alpha = .97$).

Meaning in Life. Participants completed a state version of the five-item Presence of Meaning Subscale of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (PMIL; Steger et al., 2006). A sample item is, "Thinking about this situation makes me feel that I understand my life's meaning right now" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). We averaged ratings across items to create an MIL index ($\alpha = .95$).

Positive Affect. Participants completed a four-adjective mood scale (Hepper et al., 2012) that assessed positive affect (e.g., "happy") and negative affect (e.g., "sad"; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). After reverse-scoring, we averaged responses to create a positive affect index ($\alpha = .93$).

Results

First, we conducted a series of 2 (self-reflection: enhanced vs. diminished) × 2 (time orientation: past vs. future self) ANOVAs on self-enhancement, state authenticity, MIL, and affect. We present descriptive statistics in Table 3.

Self-Enhancement Manipulation Check. A self-reflection main effect showed that participants in the enhanced condition self-enhanced more than those in the diminished condition, $F(1, 356) = 190.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .348$, 95%

Table 3. Mean and Standard Deviations for All Measures by Condition in Study 4.

	Scenario	Past			Future			Total		
	Self	Diminished	Enhanced	Total	Diminished	Enhanced	Total	Diminished	Enhanced	Total
	N	87	85	172	98	90	188	185	175	360
Self-enhancement	*M*	3.74	5.24	4.48	3.85	5.47	4.63	3.80	5.36	4.56
	SD	1.32	0.83	1.33	1.24	0.75	1.32	1.28	0.80	1.32
State authenticity	*M*	3.83	5.65	4.73	4.15	5.70	4.89	4.00	5.68	4.82
	SD	1.90	1.26	1.85	2.00	1.08	1.80	1.96	1.17	1.82
Meaning in life	*M*	4.24	4.81	4.52	4.06	4.98	4.50	4.15	4.89	4.51
	SD	1.53	1.52	1.55	1.73	1.51	1.69	1.64	1.51	1.62
Positive affect	*M*	4.64	5.32	4.98	4.58	5.21	4.88	4.61	5.26	4.93
	SD	1.68	1.49	1.62	1.47	1.34	1.44	1.57	1.41	1.53

Note. $N = 360$.

CI [1.34, 1.78]. Neither the time orientation main effect, $F(1, 356) = 2.41$, $p = .121$, $\eta_p^2 = .007$, nor the self-reflection × time orientation interaction, $F(1, 356) = .31$, $p = .580$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, was significant. The manipulation was effective.

State Authenticity. A self-reflection main effect indicated that participants in the enhanced condition reported higher authenticity than those in the diminished condition, $F(1, 356) = 96.48$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .213$, 95% CI [1.35, 2.02]. Neither the time orientation main effect, $F(1, 356) = 1.17$, $p = .280$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$, nor the self-reflection × time orientation interaction, $F(1, 356) = .63$, $p = .427$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$, was significant.

Meaning in Life. Participants in the enhanced condition reported more MIL than those in the diminished condition, $F(1, 356) = 19.58$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .052$, 95% CI [.41, 1.07]. Neither the time orientation main effect, $F(1, 356) = .001$, $p = .978$, $\eta_p^2 = .000$, nor the self-reflection × time orientation interaction, $F(1, 356) = 1.13$, $p = .288$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$, was significant.

Positive Affect. Participants in the enhanced condition reported more positive affect than those in the diminished condition, $F(1, 356) = 16.93$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .045$, 95% CI [.34, .96]. Neither the time orientation main effect, $F(1, 356) = .30$, $p = .587$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, nor the self-reflection × time orientation interaction, $F(1, 356) = .03$, $p = .868$, $\eta_p^2 = .000$, was significant. Entering affect as a covariate in the preceding analyses did not alter the results.[3]

Mediation Analysis. The self-reflection × time orientation interactions were not significant. So, instead of a moderated mediation analysis, we conducted a mediation analysis using PROCESS model 4 (Hayes, 2018) with 10,000 bootstrapping estimates. We entered self-reflection (enhanced vs. diminished) as the predictor, authenticity as the mediator, and MIL as the outcome.

The overall indirect effect was significant, estimate = .66, 95% CI [.46, .87], $SE = .10$. Participants who enhanced experienced higher authenticity, which in turn positively predicted MIL (Figure 1). Furthermore, the mediation model remained significant after controlling for positive affect, estimate = .43, 95% CI [.26, .61], $SE = .09$.

Discussion

The Study 4 results converged with those of Study 3 to support the hypothesis that self-enhancement augments authenticity. We obtained these results using an alternative self-enhancement manipulation and state authenticity measure to those of Study 3. In addition, Study 4 demonstrated that authenticity mediates the effect of self-enhancement on MIL independent of positive affect and time orientation.

Study 5

Studies 1 and 2 showed an association between self-enhancement and authenticity, whereas Studies 3 and 4 indicated that self-enhancement increases authenticity. These findings are consistent with the self-enhancement framework of authenticity. As a reminder, though, this framework anticipates a reciprocal relation between the two constructs. We tested in pre-registered Study 5 (https://aspredicted.org/WXB_SRK) the causal effect of authenticity on self-enhancement. We manipulated authenticity (compared to inauthenticity and control) and assessed its effect on self-enhancement.

Authenticity is associated with higher MIL (Sedikides et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2008). It is also positively associated with other indices of psychological well-being, such as thriving (Kelley et al., 2022), which reflects a holistic view of healthy functioning that encompasses assorted constructs (e.g., belonging, optimism, purpose, self-efficacy, vitality). Likewise, self-enhancement is positively associated both with MIL (Abeyta et al., 2017; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011) and thriving (Dufner et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2003).

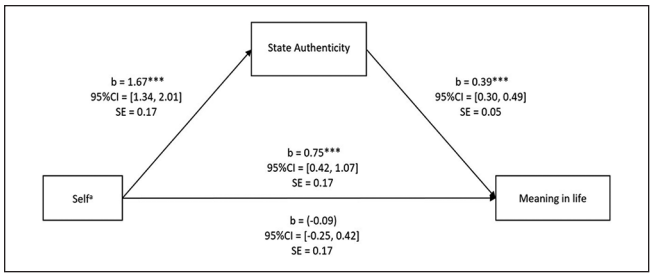

Figure 1. Regression Coefficients for the Relation Between Self and Meaning in Life, Mediated by State Authenticity in Study 4.
Note. The regression coefficients between self and meaning in life, controlling for state authenticity, are in parentheses.
[a]The enhanced condition was coded as 1, and the diminished condition was coded as 0.
***$p < .001$.

We therefore proceeded to test whether self-enhancement mediates the effect of authenticity on MIL and thriving.

Method

Participants. A power analysis (G*Power 3.1; Faul et al., 2009) indicated that 432 participants would yield 80% power to detect a small to medium effect in a one-way ANOVA ($f = .15$, assuming $\alpha = .05$). We recruited 443 U.S.-based Prolific workers for $.85 (85 cents). After excluding one participant whose responses to two attention-check items were below the scale median, the final sample comprised 442 participants[4] (223 women, 206 men, 7 non-binary individuals, 1 transgender woman, 1 transgender man, 4 unspecified) ranging in age from 18 to 79 years ($M = 35.70$, $SD = 13.80$). Of them, 77.83% were White, 6.11% Black, 0.90% Native American, 7.47% Asian, 0.45% Hawaiian, 4.52% mixed race, and 2.71% race unspecified. We randomly assigned participants to conditions (authenticity vs. inauthenticity vs. control).

Procedure and Measures. We ran the study on Qualtrics. We modeled our manipulation after Gino et al. (2015). Participants in the authenticity condition recalled and described (for a maximum of 5 minutes) a time in their personal or professional life when they behaved in a way that "made you feel true to yourself, that made you feel authentic." Participants in the inauthenticity condition recalled and described a time that made them feel untrue to themselves and inauthentic. Finally, participants in the control condition recalled and described a neutral experience (e.g., what happened yesterday, throughout the day). Next, all participants completed a state authenticity manipulation check using the same three-item measure as in Study 4 ($\alpha = .98$).

Self-Enhancement. Participants completed the same self-enhancement measure as in Study 4 ($\alpha = .95$).

Well-Being: MIL and Thriving. We assessed MIL with the PMIL ($\alpha = .94$), as in Study 4. We assessed thriving with the 10-item Brief Inventory of Thriving (Su et al., 2014). A sample item is, "Thinking about this situation makes me feel I am achieving most of my goals" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = 0.96$).

Positive Affect. Participants completed the same positive affect measure as in Study 4 ($\alpha = 0.93$).

Data-Analytic Strategy. Following the approach of Kelley et al. (2022), we first conducted a series of one-way ANOVAs to assess the influence of the manipulation on the manipulation check, self-enhancement, MIL, thriving, and positive affect. If statistically significant, we followed with a planned orthogonal (linear) contrast to assess whether the value of each variable would be—as anticipated—highest in the authenticity condition (=+1), intermediate in the control condition (=0), and lowest in the inauthenticity condition (=−1).

Results

Levene's test for homogeneity of variances was significant for all measures, Fs ≥ 3.01, ps $\leq .05$. Thus, we report Welch's Fs for all omnibus tests. We provide the descriptive statistics in Table 4.

Manipulation Check. The omnibus effect on the level of authenticity was significant, $F(2, 272.62) = 176.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .54$. The planned linear contrast was also significant, $t(201.55) = 18.64$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.40$. Level of authenticity was highest in the authenticity condition ($M = 6.22$, $SD = .89$), intermediate in the control condition ($M = 5.92$, $SD = 1.10$), and lowest in the inauthenticity condition ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.83$). The manipulation was effective.

Self-Enhancement. The omnibus effect on self-enhancement was significant, $F(2, 277.32) = 36.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .16$, as was the linear contrast, $t(220.13) = 8.50$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.04$. Self-enhancement was strongest in the authenticity condition ($M = 5.45$, $SD = .83$), intermediate in the control condition ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.07$), and weakest in the inauthenticity condition ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.46$).

Meaning in Life. The omnibus effect on MIL was significant, $F(2, 290.75) = 15.77$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$. The linear contrast was also significant, $t(276.86) = 5.62$, $p < .001$, $d = .65$. MIL was highest in the authenticity condition ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.36$), intermediate in the control condition ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.59$), and lowest in the inauthenticity condition ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.56$).

Thriving. The omnibus effect on thriving was significant, $F(2, 289.79) = 15.94$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$, as was the linear contrast,

Table 4. Mean and Standard Deviations for All Measures by Condition in Study 5.

	Scenario	Authenticity	Inauthenticity	Control	Total
	N	146	142	155	442
State authenticity	*M*	6.22	3.04	5.92	5.10
	SD	0.89	1.83	1.10	1.94
Self-enhancement	*M*	5.45	4.25	5.16	4.96
	SD	0.83	1.46	1.07	1.25
Meaning in life	*M*	4.99	4.01	4.61	4.54
	SD	1.36	1.56	1.59	1.56
Thriving	*M*	5.25	4.39	4.91	4.86
	SD	1.17	1.38	1.28	1.32
Affect	*M*	5.54	4.83	5.10	5.16
	SD	1.11	1.43	1.53	1.40

Note. $N = 442$.

$t(274.27) = 5.65$, $p < .001$, $d = .67$. Thriving was highest in the authenticity condition ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 1.17$), intermediate in the control condition ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.28$), and lowest in the inauthenticity condition ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.38$).

Positive Affect. The omnibus effect on positive affect was significant, $F(2, 287.00) = 11.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$, as was the linear contrast, $t(264.15) = 4.70$, $p < .001$, $d = .52$. Positive affect was highest in the authenticity condition ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 1.11$), intermediate in the control condition ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.53$), and lowest in the inauthenticity condition ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.43$). Importantly, entering positive affect as a covariate in the above-reported analyses on self-enhancement, MIL, and thriving did not alter the results.[5]

Mediation Analysis. To assess whether self-enhancement mediated the effect of authenticity on well-being, we conducted mediation analyses via PROCESS model 4 (Hayes, 2018) with 10,000 bootstrapping estimates. We entered the authenticity manipulation as predictor, self-enhancement as mediator, and MIL and thriving as outcomes.

When MIL was the outcome, the overall indirect effect for the contrast between the authenticity and inauthenticity conditions was significant, estimate = .68, 95% CI [.49, .88], $SE = .10$. Participants in the authenticity (vs. inauthenticity) condition reported higher self-enhancement, which positively predicted MIL (Figure 2). Moreover, the model remained significant after controlling for positive affect, estimate = .41, 95% CI [.25, .57], $SE = .08$. In addition, the overall indirect effect for the contrast between the authenticity and control conditions was significant, estimate = .16, 95% CI [.04, .30], $SE = .06$. Participants in the authenticity (vs. control) condition reported higher self-enhancement, which positively predicted MIL. The overall indirect effect for the contrast between the inauthenticity and control conditions was likewise significant, estimate = .51, 95% CI [.34, .71], $SE = 0.09$. Participants in the inauthenticity (vs. control) condition reported lower self-enhancement, which negatively predicted MIL.

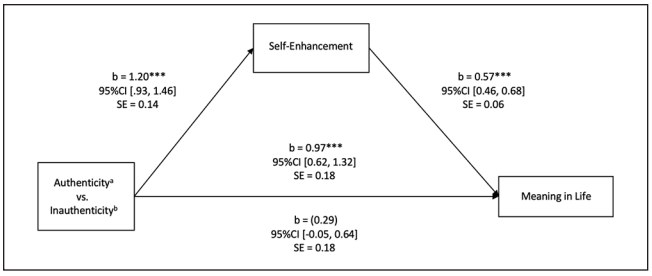

Figure 2. Regression Coefficients for the Relation Between Scenario and Meaning in Life, Mediated by Self-Enhancement, in Study 5.
Note. The regression coefficients between scenario and meaning in life, controlling for self-enhancement, are in parentheses.
[a]Coded as 1. [b]Coded as 0.
***$p < .001$.

When thriving was the outcome, the overall indirect effect for the contrast between the authenticity and inauthenticity conditions was significant, estimate = .63, 95% CI [.46, .82], $SE = .10$. Participants who were in the authenticity (vs. inauthenticity) condition reported more self-enhancement, which positively predicted thriving (Figure 3). In addition, the model remained significant after controlling for positive affect, estimate = .33, 95% CI [.21, .48], $SE = .07$. Furthermore, the overall indirect effect for the contrast between the authenticity and control conditions was significant, estimate = .15, 95% CI [.04, .28], $SE = .06$. Participants in the authenticity (vs. control) condition reported higher self-enhancement, which positively predicted thriving. Finally, the overall indirect effect for the contrast between the inauthenticity and control conditions was significant, estimate = .48, 95% CI [.31, .67], $SE = .09$. Participants in the inauthenticity (vs. control) condition reported lower self-enhancement, which negatively predicted thriving.

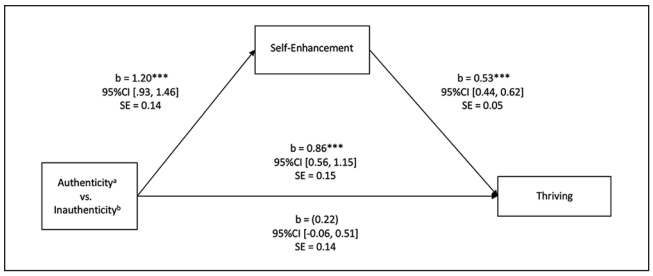

Figure 3. Regression Coefficients for the Relation Between Scenario and Thriving, Mediated by Self-Enhancement, in Study 5.
Note. The regression coefficients between scenario and thriving, controlling for self-enhancement, are in parentheses.
[a]Coded as 1. [b]Coded as 0.
***$p < .001$.

Discussion

When participants felt authentic (vs. inauthentic and control), they engaged in self-enhancement, and doing so predicted increases in MIL and thriving. As in Study 4, controlling for positive affect did not alter the results, consistent with findings that felt authenticity overlaps only partially with positive affect (Lenton, Bruder, et al., 2013; Rivera et al., 2019; Slabu et al., 2014).

General Discussion

Authenticity has a rich tradition in philosophy and psychology and is appealing to popular culture: A Google search of "authenticity" (February 4, 2022) generated 1,900,000,000 results. To live authentically, scholars have proposed, is to escape self-delusion and have one's judgments, decisions, and behaviors guided by self-insight and veridical self-perception (Knoll et al., 2015; Wood et al., 2008). Authentic living, then, is best achieved when one's actions are aligned with their values and sentiments (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Maslow, 1971). However, people are often unaware of their psychological states and immune to the vagaries of introspection (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Wilson & Dunn, 2004). Furthermore, self-evaluations are frequently positively skewed (Vazire & Carlson, 2011; Wilson & Dunn, 2004). Indeed, people tend to form positively distorted views of themselves (Alicke et al., 2013; Sedikides et al., 2015). The literature has offered suggestive evidence of a link between authenticity and self-enhancement (Christy et al., 2016; Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2016). Here, we formulated a self-enhancement framework of authenticity. We advocated that authenticity—both as trait and state—is characterized by self-enhancement rather than self-insight. Specifically, we postulated a bidirectional relation between the two constructs. Authenticity is largely based on self-enhancement, and when people feel authentic, they self-enhance—both of which have downstream consequences for well-being.

Summary of Findings and Implications

In Study 1, authenticity was positively associated with self-enhancement, operationalized as the better-than-average effect and grandiose narcissism. In Study 2, participants experienced more authenticity on days in which they self-enhanced more; also yesterday's self-enhancement predicted today's authenticity, and yesterday's authenticity predicted today's self-enhancement. In Study 3, self-enhancement (receiving favorable rather than unfavorable feedback) augmented authenticity, despite the feedback ostensibly deriving from the same diagnostic assessment. In Study 4, self-enhancement (engaging in enhanced vs. diminished reflection about one's past or future) elevated authenticity, which augmented MIL independent of positive affect. Finally, in Study 5, authenticity (vs. inauthenticity and control) increased self-enhancement, with the latter transmitting the effect of authenticity on MIL and thriving, controlling for positive affect. Taken together, authenticity and self-enhancement are not discordant; rather, they are fundamentally intertwined.

Although our research represents the first direct test of the relation between self-enhancement and authenticity, the results are consistent with several literature streams. For instance, authenticity is linked more with moral than immoral behavior (Newman et al., 2014) and socially desirable than undesirable behavior (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2016). In addition, people believe their authentic selves to be positive and morally good and to be more positive than the authentic selves of others (Zhang & Alicke, 2021). Despite popular belief and previous conceptualizations, self-enhancement is an essential ingredient for eliciting perceptions that one is living life authentically.

Limitations and Future Directions

Future research can expand the understanding of the self-enhancement-authenticity link in several ways. We tested exclusively U.S. participants in Studies 1 to 3, and mostly U.S. participants in Studies 4 and 5. Considerable evidence points to the panculturality of both self-enhancement (Chiu et al., 2011; Chung et al., 2016; Sedikides et al., 2015) and authenticity (Ito & Kodama, 2007; Kim et al., 2022; Slabu et al., 2014), and so to the likelihood that their association is pancultural. Regardless, follow-up research would do well to test for cross-cultural specificity.

Our results indicated that self-enhancement elicits greater authenticity than self-diminishment, and literature shows that people across cultures are averse to self-diminishing feedback (Gaertner et al., 2012; Sedikides, 2012). Nevertheless, given that the acceptance of personal faults has traditionally been considered a trademark of objective authenticity—which we do not address here—future research should examine whether willing (i.e., internalized) self-diminishment

fosters authenticity. This may be more likely to occur in reference to contextualized self-aspects (perceptions of the self in specific relationships or situations) rather than global self-views (Chen et al., 2006). Nevertheless, given that both domain-specific and global self-views are predominantly positive (Gaertner et al., 1999; Kendall et al., 1989; Thomaes et al., 2017) and given the potency of the self-enhancement motive especially on personally important attributes (Anseel & Martinescu, 2020; Sedikides, 2021b; Sedikides et al., 2021), we expect that, at least among healthy or typical individuals, willing internalization of negative self-views would be rather rare.

Future work may also explore additional implications of the self-enhancement-authenticity link besides well-being. The social domain is of relevance. According to our theoretical framework, self-enhancement is intrinsic to authenticity. However, persistent and blatant self-enhancement may be viewed negatively by others (Hoorens et al., 2012; Van Damme et al., 2016). By extension, the persistent and blatant pursuit of authenticity may entail unfavorable social consequences. Relatedly, felt authenticity is not necessarily equivalent to perceived authenticity: Self-perceived authentic individuals are not necessarily seen as authentic by others. Moreover, inauthentic persons may be seen as authentic (Hart et al., 2020; Rosenblum et al., 2020). This discrepancy between felt and perceived authenticity is partially due to observers not having access to inner states of actors or actors' authentic selves. Consequently, judgments of authenticity commonly rely on actors' observable behaviors (Gershon & Smith, 2020; Johnson et al., 2004).

Observers may attempt to infer a target's authenticity by scrutinizing the target's behavior for ulterior motives. Attributions of external motives (e.g., to gain financial rewards or ingratiate) may culminate in perceptions of insincerity and inauthenticity (Gershon & Smith, 2020; Lafrenière et al., 2016). For example, observers rate donors' prosocial actions as less authentic when informed of donors' financial interests (Berman et al., 2015). Also, self-presentation strategies such as humblebragging and self-handicapping that aim to increase one's likability and perceived competence often backfire, as they raise questions about a person's earnestness and authenticity (Luginbuhl & Palmer, 1991; Sezer et al., 2018). Hence, if authenticity-driven self-enhancers raise suspicions about ulterior motives, they might be viewed unfavorably.

Coda

Contrary to historical conceptualizations and lay intuition, veridical self-insight may not light the path toward living life authentically. Instead, authenticity and self-enhancement go hand-in-hand. Authentic people think highly of themselves, and people who think highly of themselves feel authentic.

Appendix

Sample Favorable Feedback, High-Importance Trait (Study 3)

Honesty:

Your score: 94th percentile. This indicates that your honesty is higher than 94% of the students at Creighton University

Extremely ---------- **X** ----------Extremely

Low High

Sample Unfavorable Feedback, Low-Importance Trait (Study 3)

Outgoing:

Your score: 27th percentile. This indicates that 73% of the students at Creighton University are more outgoing than you are.

Extremely ----------**X**----------Extremely

Low High

Acknowledgments

We dedicate this article to the authors' late collaborator and friend, Mark Alicke.

Data Availability Statement

All study data and materials can be found on Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/ep3xn/?view_only=a8c57d2f3b744e8ca7e5c1208f71ff19). Pre-registrations can be found on AsPredicted.org (https://aspredicted.org/WXB_SRK and https://aspredicted.org/VKP_N3J).

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Ethical Approval

All studies reported in this work have been conducted according to APA ethical standards for the treatment of human subjects.

ORCID iDs

Corey L. Guenther https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3585-9734
Yiyue Zhang https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4594-6751

Notes

1. Degrees of freedom vary across coefficients due to missing data.
2. After the Southampton Authenticity Scale, participants completed the Real-Self Overlap Scale (Lenton, Slabu, et al., 2013). They viewed six diagrams of two separate circles overlapping to varying degrees, where one represented the "present self," and the other, the "authentic self." Participants indicated "which pair of circles (1–6) best represents how close you feel at this moment to your true, authentic self." An ANOVA produced no main effects or interactions, all Fs $\leq$ .708, all ps $\geq$ .401. The Real-Self Overlap Scale is a rarely used measure, perhaps due to its narrow focus on comparing the "right now" self with the "real self." We abandoned its use.
3. A 2 $\times$ 2 analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) controlling for positive affect yielded a main effect of self-reflection on the manipulation check, $F(1, 355) = 165.22$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .318$; authenticity, $F(1, 355) = 78.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .181$; and MIL, $F(1, 355) = 6.75$, $p = .010$, $\eta_p^2 = .019$. No other effect was significant, Fs ≤ 3.32, ps $\geq .07$.
4. We detected eight outliers as per pre-registration criteria. However, excluding outliers did not impact results; thus, we reported all data.
5. An ANCOVA controlling for positive affect yielded an effect on the manipulation check, $F(2, 438) = 237.96$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .521$; self-enhancement, $F(2, 438) = 34.12$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .135$; MIL, $F(2, 438) = 7.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .033$; and thriving, $F(2, 438) = 7.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .034$.

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