RESEARCH REPORT

NOVEMBER 2026

Communication Between Lifestyle Influencers and Audiences on Social Media

Generation Z in Lebanon



51 *of* 66

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AUTHOR

Sarah Abou Fares

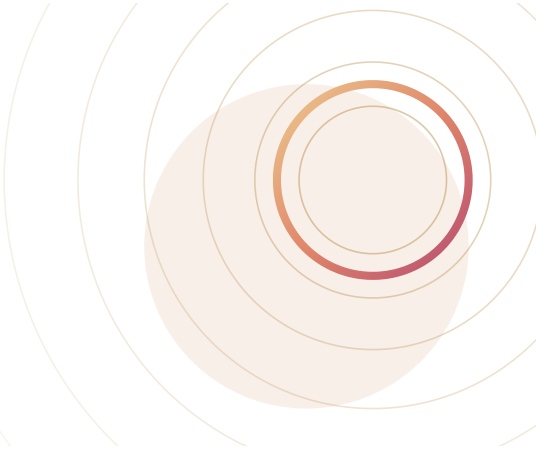
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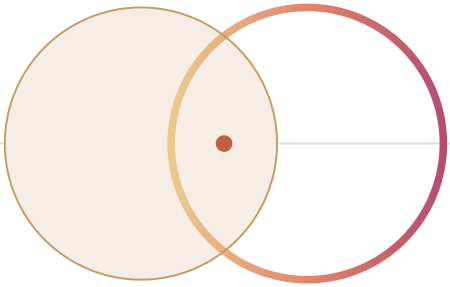
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Abstract

Social media influencers have become important actors in contemporary digital communication. Through the presentation of products, lifestyles, identities, and social norms, they can shape how audiences interpret and evaluate everyday life, consumption, and self-presentation. Previous research has primarily examined influencer credibility, parasocial relationships, engagement, and advertising effectiveness, while more recent scholarship has increasingly addressed the ethical, psychological, and social risks associated with influencer culture. In particular, research has raised concerns about perceived authenticity, sponsorship transparency, social comparison, and the representation of idealized lifestyles.

This study examines the communicative relationship between social media influencers and members of Generation Z in Lebanon. It focuses on whether and how influencer content is perceived to contribute to social pressure, unrealistic expectations, negative self-perceptions, and doubts about digital authenticity. Using a mixed-methods design, the study combines a quantitative survey of 66 respondents aged 19–28 with three qualitative interviews. The analysis explores participants' levels of trust, emotional attachment, engagement, perceived influencer impact, and attitudes toward influencer responsibility, transparency, and sponsorship disclosure.

The findings suggest that, although many respondents maintain a relatively emotionally distant relationship with influencers, three-quarters perceive influencer content as promoting unrealistic lifestyles, and about a quarter say it leads them to compare themselves with influencers. For some respondents, these perceptions are linked to concerns about self-image and self-worth. At the same time, respondents express strong expectations that influencers should disclose commercial relationships more clearly and assume greater ethical responsibility for the content they publish. However, the results also indicate that influencer influence is not deterministic. Participants demonstrate a degree of critical awareness, although almost a third report having bought products they did not need because of influencer recommendations. Overall, the study highlights the complex relationship between digital exposure, perceived authenticity, psychological responses, and audience agency. It contributes to research on influencer culture by suggesting that Generation Z audiences are neither passive recipients nor entirely unaffected observers, but actively negotiate the credibility, intentions, and social consequences of influencer communication.

Key Findings

64% Social media use is heavy: 64% of the 66 respondents spend five or more hours a day on social media, most often on Instagram (56%) and TikTok (29%).

17% Relationships with influencers are more distant: only 17% regularly follow influencers, 15% feel emotionally attached to some of them, and just 5% trust influencers' opinions more than traditional advertisements.

39% More than a third (39%) agree with at least one of three statements about negative effects: anxiety when comparing themselves with influencers (27%), the view that influencer content can negatively affect their self-confidence (27%) or pressure to keep up with trends (15%). In open-ended answers, some respondents describe negative self-comparison, particularly around body image and material wealth.

77% Three-quarters (77%) feel that many influencers present unrealistic lifestyles, and 61% believe that, overall, influencer–audience interaction has more negative than positive effects.

30% More than a quarter (30%) say they have bought products they did not need because of influencer recommendations.

85% Respondents value personal experiences (56%) and honest product reviews (52%) most, and they expect more from influencers: 85% want them to take greater responsibility for their content, and 70% want sponsored content disclosed more clearly.

“ The interviewees question influencers' honesty, yet describe how idealized lifestyles make young people compare themselves and feel they are not good enough.

SECTION 01

Introduction

The rapid expansion of social media has transformed how individuals communicate, access information, consume products, and present themselves to others. Within this environment, social media influencers (SMIs) have become important communicative actors. Through lifestyle content, personal narratives, product recommendations, and forms of self-disclosure, influencers can develop an appearance of intimacy and authenticity that distinguishes them from traditional advertising sources. Previous research has therefore examined influencers in relation to source credibility, perceived authenticity, parasocial relationships, audience engagement, and advertising effectiveness (Audrezet et al., 2020).

The growing commercial importance of this form of communication is also visible in the Lebanese advertising market. According to Statista Market Insights, spending on influencer advertising in Lebanon is estimated to have increased from USD 1.82 million in 2017 to USD 14.46 million in 2024 and is projected to reach USD 29.70 million in 2030. Thus, the projected market value in 2030 is about 16.3 times the 2017 level. These figures indicate the increasing economic relevance of influencer advertising and the growing integration of influencers into commercial communication. They do not, however, provide evidence of psychological effects or establish a causal relationship between influencer exposure and audience well-being. The Statista figures are therefore used here as contextual evidence for the expansion of the market rather than as evidence of audience influence (Statista, 2025).

The academic literature presents influencer communication as a complex phenomenon with both persuasive potential and possible risks. Influencer content can increase perceived relatability, engagement, trust, and product interest, particularly when audiences perceive the influencer as credible, similar to themselves, and authentic (Lou & Yuan, 2019). At the same time, scholars have raised concerns about the commercial ambiguity of influencer communication, insufficient sponsorship disclosure, idealized self-presentation, social comparison, and the promotion of unrealistic lifestyles (Audrezet et al., 2020). These perspectives should not be treated as mutually exclusive. Influencer communication may be engaging and persuasive while also generating uncertainty about commercial intentions or pressure to conform to socially desirable digital ideals.

This tension is particularly relevant when examining Generation Z. Members of this generation are an important audience for influencer communication, but they should not be understood as either uniformly media-literate and resistant to persuasion or uniformly vulnerable to digital influence. Their responses may vary according to perceived authenticity, trust, emotional attachment, advertising literacy, content type, and individual social circumstances. A central question is therefore how Generation Z audiences interpret and negotiate influencer content: whether they experience it primarily as entertainment and information, as a source of social connection, or as a potential source of comparison, pressure, and unrealistic expectations.

Against this background, the present study investigates the perceived communicative relationship between social media influencers and Generation Z audiences in Lebanon. It focuses on audience perceptions of social pressure, self-perception, emotional responses, influencer credibility, authenticity, sponsorship disclosure, and ethical responsibility. Rather than assuming that influencer content directly causes psychological harm, the study examines how respondents interpret such content and whether they report associations between influencer exposure, social comparison, perceived pressure, and changes in self-perception. It also considers whether audiences remain behaviourally autonomous, particularly in relation to purchasing decisions.

The Lebanese context gives this research particular relevance. Lebanon has experienced overlapping economic, political, public-health, and conflict-related crises. The World Bank describes the post-2019 situation as a severe economic and financial crisis (World Bank, 2024). An article in the World Health Organization's Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal likewise identifies the cumulative effects of armed conflict, economic collapse, the Beirut Port explosion, the COVID-19 pandemic, and political instability as important challenges for mental health in Lebanon (Atoui et al., 2024).

This background does not demonstrate that influencer communication causes psychological distress. It does, however, make it important to examine how young audiences interpret digital ideals and social pressure within a society affected by prolonged instability.

The study is motivated by two related developments: the increasing economic significance of influencer advertising in Lebanon and the need to understand how audiences experience its communicative and social consequences. Existing research has generated substantial knowledge about influencer marketing, credibility, engagement, and purchase intentions, but comparatively less attention has been given to how Generation Z audiences in Lebanon negotiate the relationship between perceived authenticity and commercial communication, or between critical awareness

and perceived social pressure. By combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews, this study aims to provide a more differentiated account of audience experiences. It contributes to research on influencer culture by examining not only whether influencers are perceived as influential, but also how, under which conditions, and with what perceived psychological, social, and ethical implications.

SECTION 02

Literature Review / Theoretical Background

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

This study draws primarily on parasocial relationship theory and uses and gratifications theory. These perspectives are complementary: parasocial relationship theory explains how audiences may develop a perceived sense of intimacy and emotional connection with media personalities, while uses and gratifications theory conceptualizes audiences as active users who select media to satisfy particular needs. Together, the theories provide a suitable framework for examining both the relational dimension of influencer communication and the agency of Generation Z audiences.

The concept of parasocial interaction was introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956) to describe the illusion of a face-to-face relationship between media personalities and their audiences. In social media environments, this perception may be intensified through direct address, self-disclosure, comment sections, live streams, and the regular presentation of everyday experiences. Influencers can consequently appear familiar, relatable, and trustworthy, even though the relationship generally remains asymmetrical. Research on influencer communication indicates that perceived attractiveness, similarity, and fairness in interactions with followers may strengthen parasocial relationships and, through them, increase followers' interest in influencer-promoted products (Yuan & Lou, 2020). This perspective is relevant to the present study because emotional attachment may affect how respondents interpret influencer messages, evaluate commercial content, and respond to the lifestyles, opinions, and values presented by influencers.

Uses and gratifications theory, associated with Katz et al. (1973), views media audiences as active participants who use media to satisfy needs such as information, entertainment, social interaction, self-expression, identity formation, and escapism. Applied to influencer communication, the theory suggests that users may follow influencers not only because they intend to purchase recommended products, but also because they seek advice, inspiration, companionship, entertainment, or models for self-presentation. This approach is particularly relevant to the present study because it avoids portraying Generation Z as a passive or uniformly vulnerable

audience. It allows the research to examine why respondents engage with influencer content and whether the gratifications they seek coexist with critical awareness, perceived pressure, social comparison, or concerns about authenticity.

The two theories can therefore be integrated into a common analytical framework. Uses and gratifications theory helps explain why audiences choose to follow and engage with influencers, whereas parasocial relationship theory helps explain how repeated engagement may develop into perceived intimacy and emotional attachment. These processes may influence trust, openness to persuasion, and the interpretation of commercial or lifestyle messages. However, audience agency, advertising literacy, and critical awareness may limit or modify these processes. The present study therefore does not assume that exposure to influencer content produces uniform outcomes. Instead, it examines how motives for engagement, emotional attachment, perceived authenticity, and critical evaluation relate to perceptions of social pressure and self-perception.

2.2 From Commercial Effectiveness to Broader Social Consequences

Research on social media influencers has traditionally focused on commercial effectiveness, including source credibility, engagement, brand attitudes, trust, and purchase intentions. More recent literature has expanded this focus to include psychological, social, ethical, and regulatory concerns. These include the management of authenticity, insufficient sponsorship disclosure, misinformation, idealized lifestyles, social comparison, and the responsibilities of influencers, brands, and platforms. The literature does not suggest that influencer communication is exclusively harmful. Rather, it indicates that persuasive and entertaining communication may coexist with risks related to commercial ambiguity, unrealistic representations, and the social consequences of highly visible digital norms.

The Dark Side of Social Media Influencers: A Research Agenda for Analysing Deceptive Practices and Regulatory Challenges (Ekinci et al., 2025) illustrates this broader perspective. The authors argue that influencer communication can produce positive outcomes, such as entertainment, engagement, and consumer interest, while also involving deceptive or ethically questionable practices. They call for a multidisciplinary approach that combines marketing, psychology, ethics, and legal perspectives in order to examine the wider consequences of influencer marketing. The study identifies authenticity and transparency as important conditions for trust and engagement and emphasizes the need for inclusive, responsible, and well-being-oriented content and brand collaborations. These arguments are directly relevant to the present study because they support the inclusion of perceived authenticity, sponsorship disclosure, and influencer responsibility as central analytical dimensions.

The study *Mental Health of Social Media Influencers* (Bray et al., 2024) addresses a related but distinct issue: the psychological well-being of influencers themselves. It highlights the pressures associated with maintaining a continuous online presence, managing self-presentation, and remaining visible in a competitive attention economy. This perspective is important because influencer communication is produced within an occupational environment that may involve emotional and psychological demands. However, findings concerning the mental health of influencers cannot be used as direct evidence of negative effects on followers. The present study therefore treats this work as contextual background and maintains a clear distinction between the well-being of content creators and the psychological responses of audiences.

A descriptive mixed-methods study conducted in Mauritania examined public perceptions of the negative social consequences of influencer content (Sidi, 2025). The study reported that 88% of participants believed that some influencers negatively affected social values and morals, while 82% associated influencers with the circulation of inaccurate or misleading information. In addition, 75% believed that influencers promoted products that could be harmful to health, and 85% identified TikTok as the platform posing the greatest threat to social values. These results indicate substantial public concern about the social and ethical consequences of influencer activity. Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. The study is descriptive and context-specific, and its percentages cannot automatically be generalized to Generation Z in Lebanon. Its relevance to the present research lies primarily in demonstrating the value of combining survey data with qualitative accounts and in identifying regulation, advertising standards, information verification, digital education, and platform accountability as important areas for further investigation.

Another strand of recent research has examined the relationship between influencer activity, misinformation, and online toxicity (Di Domenico et al., 2026). The central argument is that influencers may have stronger incentives than ordinary users to maximize attention and engagement, potentially increasing the visibility of emotionally charged or misleading content. The study further suggests that parasocial attachment may reduce critical evaluation when followers strongly identify with an influencer or perceive the influencer as particularly trustworthy. From this perspective, misinformation may spread through networks of identification and loyalty rather than through information exposure alone. These arguments are relevant to the present study because they connect parasocial relationships with trust, critical awareness, and influencer responsibility. At the same time, these findings concerning toxicity or misinformation amplification come from one specific study and should not be generalized to all influencers or platforms.

Recent research has also suggested that influencer effects may operate through social and psychological mechanisms that are less direct than purchasing behaviour (Suparaku, 2026). Exposure to influencer content may be associated with perceived social pressure, social comparison, self-perception, and the internalization of digital norms. Repeated representations of idealized lifestyles, appearance, success, and belonging can provide audiences with standards against which they evaluate themselves. In addition, unclear boundaries between personal content and paid communication may make it difficult for users to recognize the persuasive intentions behind influencer messages. This line of research supports the inclusion of self-perception, perceived pressure, authenticity, transparency, and ethical responsibility in the present study. It also challenges a deterministic understanding of influencer influence: audiences may interpret, resist, negotiate, or selectively act upon influencer messages.

2.3 Critical Synthesis and Research Gap

The reviewed literature reveals several important limitations. First, a considerable part of the established influencer literature focuses on advertising effectiveness, credibility, engagement, and purchase intentions, whereas the perceived social and psychological consequences of influencer communication remain less consistently examined. Second, existing studies often focus either on influencer practices or on audience responses, but less frequently connect perceived authenticity, emotional attachment, social pressure, self-perception, and audience agency within one analytical framework. Third, much of the available evidence is based on contexts outside Lebanon, which limits the extent to which existing findings can be transferred to Lebanese Generation Z audiences.

The present study addresses these gaps by examining influencer communication as both a relational and a socially meaningful form of communication. Its quantitative component investigates patterns in trust, emotional attachment, engagement, perceived influence, social pressure, self-perception, and attitudes toward transparency and responsibility. Its qualitative component explores how respondents describe their relationships with influencers, interpret idealized content, and distinguish between entertainment, inspiration, persuasion, and pressure. This mixed methods approach also makes it possible to examine whether respondents' reported critical awareness limits the behavioural impact of influencer content, particularly in relation to purchasing decisions.

The theoretical framework therefore treats Generation Z audiences as active media users while recognizing that repeated engagement may foster parasocial attachment and increase the perceived relevance of influencer messages. Uses and gratifications theory explains why users follow and engage with influencers; parasocial relationship theory explains how these interactions may become personally meaningful.

The combination of both perspectives allows the study to investigate not only whether respondents perceive influencers as influential, but also how this influence is negotiated, under which conditions it is perceived as persuasive or pressuring, and how concerns about authenticity and transparency shape audience interpretations.

Overall, the literature suggests that influencer influence is contingent rather than deterministic. It may depend on the needs audiences seek to satisfy, the degree of emotional attachment they develop, the authenticity and transparency they perceive, the type of content they encounter, and their ability to critically evaluate commercial and social messages. This framework provides the conceptual basis for examining the relationship between influencer communication, social pressure, self-perception, and audience agency among Generation Z respondents in Lebanon.

SECTION 03

Research Questions, Data, and Methodology

MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION

How do Generation Z audiences in Lebanon perceive the relationship between social media influencer content, social pressure and their psychological well-being?

SUB-QUESTIONS

1. Which aspects of influencer communication do audiences perceive as generating social pressure?
2. How do audiences interpret and respond to these messages?
3. What makes audiences trust or distrust influencers?
4. What social, emotional and behavioural consequences do respondents associate with influencer content?

Methodology

To address the research questions, this study adopts a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative research methods. The quantitative component consisted of a survey distributed primarily to Generation Z social media users in Beirut and South Lebanon through snowball sampling. This group was selected because it represents one of the most active and influential audiences on social media platforms and is highly exposed to influencer content. The survey was designed to measure the perceived extent to which communication with influencers contributes to social pressure and influences audience behaviour and psychological well-being.

The questionnaire, created with Google Forms, contained 26 questions (reproduced in the Appendix). Five covered age, gender, education, daily time on social media and the platform used most. Sixteen were statements about interaction with influencers, digital relationships, behaviour, emotional impact and overall perceptions, each rated on a five-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Four

asked about lifestyle influencer content, including what makes it feel authentic (several answers allowed) and whether the use of AI should be disclosed. The final question asked respondents to describe, in their own words, their most challenging or upsetting experience with a lifestyle influencer.

The qualitative component involved semi-structured interviews with three young women from the survey's target age group: a 20-year-old English literature student at the Lebanese University from the Bekaa, a 23-year-old fifth-year pharmacy student from the West Bekaa, and a 27-year-old dentist from the Chouf. The first two interviews took place on July 28, 2026, and the third on July 29, 2026. The first was held online, by WhatsApp call; the second took place at the interviewee's home and the third at the dental clinic where she works. The first two interviews were conducted in Arabic, and their answers are quoted here in English translation. Influencers were also invited to take part, by direct message on Instagram and by email, but none replied. These interviews provided deeper insights into the experiences, perceptions, and perspectives of the audience side of the interaction. They allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how social pressure is created, experienced, and interpreted within digital environments. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, the study aims to develop a richer and more nuanced understanding of the role of influencer–audience interactions in generating social pressure on social media.

The survey was conducted between July 16 and July 22, 2026, and generated a total of 82 responses. Its primary objective was to examine how communication between influencers and audiences on social media affects digital relationships and audience behaviour among Generation Z users aged 14–28 in Lebanon, with a particular focus on potential negative impacts. This report analyses the 66 responses from people aged 19–28; the 16 responses in the 14–18 age group were excluded (see below).

Because the survey used snowball sampling and 82% of respondents were female, the results describe this group of respondents and cannot be generalized to all members of Generation Z in Lebanon. In addition, the introduction to the survey told respondents that the study focused on negative impacts, which may have influenced some answers.

Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous, and the survey did not ask for names or contact details. Parental consent was not obtained for respondents under 18. Because the youngest age group in the survey (14–18 years) does not separate them from 18-year-olds, all 16 responses in this group were excluded from the analysis. The three interviewees are adults and agreed to be quoted without being named.

SECTION 04

Survey Findings

Respondent Demographics

The age distribution of the 66 respondents included in the analysis was as follows (number of respondents and share):

19–23 years	**31** (47.0%)
24–28 years	**35** (53.0%)

Regarding gender, 54 respondents (81.8%) were female, 11 (16.7%) were male, and 1 (1.5%) preferred not to disclose their gender.

The respondents' education levels were distributed as follows:

High school	**4** (6.1%)
Bachelor's degree	**42** (63.6%)
Master's or doctoral degree	**20** (30.3%)

Platform Usage

Regarding primary platform usage, respondents reported the following:

Instagram	**37** (56.1%)
TikTok	**19** (28.8%)
Other platforms, including WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, and X	**10** (15.2%)

Respondents could choose one platform. Under "Other", four named WhatsApp, three YouTube, one Facebook and one X, and one answer was unclear.

Daily Social Media Use

In terms of daily social media use, respondents reported the following levels of engagement:

Less than one hour per day	none
1–4 hours per day	**24** (36.4%)
5–8 hours per day	**32** (48.5%)
8+ hours per day	**10** (15.2%)

In total, 42 respondents (63.6%) spend five or more hours a day on social media. The answer options "5–8 hours" and "8+ hours" overlap at eight hours.

Influencer Engagement

Table 1, at the end of this section, gives the results for all 16 attitude statements. Only 11 respondents (16.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that they regularly follow influencers, while 26 (39.4%) were neutral and 29 (43.9%) disagreed. Similarly, 13 (19.7%) said they frequently like, comment on or share influencers' content, and 17 (25.8%) that they feel connected to some influencers even though they have never met them. This suggests a distinction between being exposed to influencer content and actively following influencers. Few respondents trust influencers over traditional advertising: only 3 (4.5%) said they trust influencers' opinions more than traditional advertisements, while 42 (63.6%) disagreed.

Emotional and Behavioural Impact

Ten respondents (15.2%) said they feel emotionally attached to some influencers, only three of them strongly, and 6 (9.1%) said they spend more time interacting with influencers than with the people around them. More than a third (26 respondents, 39.4%) agreed with at least one of three statements about negative effects (11 with one, 10 with two and 5 with all three): 18 (27.3%) feel anxious when comparing themselves to influencers, 18 (27.3%) said influencer content can negatively affect their self-confidence, and 10 (15.2%) feel pressure to keep up with trends. Seventeen (25.8%) said influencers make them compare their own lifestyle with that of influencers, and 24 (36.4%) that influencers affect their opinions about beauty, success or happiness. Furthermore, 20 (30.3%) stated that they had purchased products they did not need based on influencer recommendations. Asked how far lifestyle influencers affect their lifestyle choices, 13 (19.7%) answered "not at all", 26 (39.4%) "slightly", 20 (30.3%) "moderately" and 6 (9.1%) "significantly" or "very significantly"; one did not answer.

Authenticity and Content Preferences

Asked what makes lifestyle influencer content feel authentic and relevant (more than one answer was allowed), respondents most often chose personal experiences (37, 56.1%), honest product reviews (34, 51.5%) and educational tips (28, 42.4%). A consistent lifestyle focus (20, 30.3%), transparency about sponsorships and high-quality visuals (19 each, 28.8%) and audience interaction (16, 24.2%) were chosen less often. Asked how important it is for lifestyle influencers to stay focused on lifestyle-related topics, 29 respondents (43.9%) said it was important or extremely important.

Disclosure and Responsibility

The responses also indicated strong expectations regarding influencer responsibility and transparency. Fifty-six respondents (84.8%) wanted influencers to take greater responsibility for the content they publish, and 46 (69.7%) wanted sponsored content to be disclosed more clearly. Fifty-one (77.3%) felt that many influencers present unrealistic lifestyles, and 40 (60.6%) agreed that, overall, influencer–audience interaction has more negative than positive effects; only 2 (3.0%) disagreed. In relation to the use of artificial intelligence, 26 respondents (39.4%) expected AI use to be disclosed only when it significantly alters reality, 17 (25.8%) answered "yes" and 11 (16.7%) "no" to disclosure, and the remaining 12 (18.2%) were unsure or preferred not to answer.

Table 1. Responses to the 16 attitude statements (n = 66)

Agree · Neutral · Disagree — Values: % of respondents

STATEMENT	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE
I regularly follow social media influencers.	**16.7**	39.4	43.9
I frequently like, comment on, or share influencers' content.	**19.7**	19.7	60.6
I feel connected to some influencers even though I have never met them.	**25.8**	16.7	57.6
I trust influencers' opinions more than traditional advertisements.	**4.5**	31.8	63.6
I feel emotionally attached to some influencers.	**15.2**	15.2	69.7
I spend more time interacting with influencers than communicating with people around me.	**9.1**	16.7	74.2
Influencers make me compare my lifestyle with theirs.	**25.8**	19.7	54.5
I have bought products because an influencer recommended them, even when I did not need them.	**30.3**	19.7	50.0
I sometimes feel pressure to keep up with trends promoted by influencers.	**15.2**	18.2	66.7
Influencers affect my opinions about beauty, success, or happiness.	**36.4**	25.8	37.9
I sometimes feel anxious when comparing myself to influencers.	**27.3**	13.6	59.1
Influencer content can negatively affect my self-confidence.	**27.3**	13.6	59.1
I feel that many influencers present unrealistic lifestyles.	**77.3**	15.2	7.6
Influencers should be more responsible for the content they share.	**84.8**	9.1	6.1
Influencers should disclose sponsored lifestyle content more clearly.	**69.7**	25.8	4.5
Overall, influencer–audience interaction has more negative than positive effects.	**60.6**	36.4	3.0

Note. Agree combines "agree" and "strongly agree"; disagree combines "disagree" and "strongly disagree". Rows may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

Open-Ended Responses

Thirty-five respondents answered the open question about their most challenging or upsetting experience with a lifestyle influencer. Of the 24 substantive answers, 14 described a negative experience and 10 said they had had none. The negative experiences revealed several recurring themes. Several respondents expressed distrust because of sponsored content or what they considered excessive personal disclosure. Others reported negative self-comparison, particularly in relation to body image and material wealth.

SECTION 05

Interview Findings

INTERVIEWEE 1

20, student

English literature, Lebanese University; from the Bekaa

Online (WhatsApp call), July 28, 2026 · Arabic

INTERVIEWEE 2

23, student

Fifth-year pharmacy student; from the West Bekaa

In person, at her home, July 28, 2026 · Arabic

INTERVIEWEE 3

27, dentist

Works at a dental clinic; from the Chouf

In person, at the clinic, July 29, 2026

For the qualitative method, the interviews covered six questions (see the Appendix), and the answers were as follows:

The first interview participant, a 20-year-old university student, believes that social media influencers have a strong impact on Generation Z's attitudes, behaviours, and self-perception. They normalize and influence lifestyle choices such as fashion, beauty, fitness, and even career paths. "Many Gen Z individuals look up to influencers as role models, which can affect how they view themselves, their worth, and their position in society," she stated. She added that she doesn't really trust influencers or fully believe them. But she might trust them if there is real evidence, positive feedback from other people, or if someone she knows has tried what they recommend and benefited from it, for example. In her view, influencers often create unrealistic images of life and appearance. This can make young people feel like they are not good enough or that they need to be more. It can also lower their self-confidence because influencers show perfect looks. She personally never felt pressure, anxiety, or comparison because of influencer content: "If I take anything from them, it is usually inspiration and motivation. I focus on the positive side, and it has never affected me negatively because I don't allow myself to compare or be influenced in that way." She believes that influencers should be honest about their content, especially when it comes to advertising. They should not lie just to make money. They must show real things and share truthful information. They should also try to have a positive impact on people, especially younger audiences that may not have enough awareness and can be easily influenced. She wrapped up by saying that many young people still engage with influencer content even if they know it is not real. This can be because they may lack awareness, or because the content is fun and interesting. Also, they might like the influencer or see them as a role model, so they get influenced by them anyway.

The second interview participant, a 23-year-old pharmacy student, thinks influencers have a big impact on Gen Z because many people follow their daily lives and opinions. She says that they can influence what people wear, buy, think, and even how they see themselves. It can be sometimes useful and many other times harmful. She added that she trusts influencers who seem honest, admit when something is sponsored, and don't pretend their life is perfect. She distrusts people who promote too many products or constantly change their opinions just because they are being paid. But generally, she thinks we should always remember it's their job and not everything they show is honest. She agreed that influencers contribute to unrealistic expectations: "Many influencers only show the best parts of their lives, so it can make people think they aren't successful or attractive enough." This can lower confidence and make people compare themselves too much. And sometimes seeing influencers with perfect bodies or expensive lifestyles makes people feel pressure or compare themselves. On the other hand, influencers who share their struggles or encourage healthy habits can be motivating and inspiring. She thinks influencers should be honest. They should clearly say when something is an advertisement and let people know if photos or videos are heavily edited or made with AI. They should think about how their content affects younger audiences. She also thinks young people are still affected because they see this content every day. Even if they know it's not completely real, it still influences their thoughts and emotions over time. People also want to fit in and follow trends, so it's hard not to be affected.

> *"Many influencers only show the best parts of their lives, so it can make people think they aren't successful or attractive enough.*
>
> INTERVIEWEE 2, PHARMACY STUDENT, 23

"I think disadvantages are more than the advantages, so much bad influence, copying actions and trends," the third interviewee, a 27-year-old dentist, said.

In her view, the influence may be positive sometimes, but it can also create unhealthy comparisons. She added: "If an influencer is already known as a person who accepts paid advertisements, I don't trust him whatsoever, but on this platform some people are authentic and really try the products for so long in front of the camera and pay for them to test them ... this may take my attention sometimes." She added that this can also be related to this generation's acts and clothes and to a "want to be" mentality: young people keep on comparing themselves to the fake beauty standards that are introduced daily on our platforms. She said she can tell this from personal experience: "people my age make x10 the money and success I make with x10 less effort." This may disturb the normal image of life for many people and may force them to hate what they do daily for a good living. She agreed with other respondents that influencers should be more realistic before ruining the whole

society with their irresponsible acts and fake vision. To her, young people still follow and watch as a form of running away from their reality and trying to fit in with this delusional vision; this content may feed the dreams they have.

> *People my age make x10 the money and success I make with x10 less effort.*
>
> INTERVIEWEE 3, DENTIST, 27

SECTION 06

Discussion

The primary objective of this study is to determine the relationship between social media influencers and Generation Z audiences and its effects. The primary finding of this research is that a considerable part of the audience, more than a third of respondents (39%), report being negatively affected by influencers on social media, even if they know well what negative consequences this content can have. This answers the main research question: How do Generation Z audiences in Lebanon perceive the relationship between social media influencer content, social pressure and their psychological well-being?

These findings can be explained by combining Parasocial Interaction and Uses and Gratifications Theory.

First, the **Parasocial Interaction Theory,** which was developed by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl (1956), explains how audiences develop feelings of closeness, intimacy, and friendship with influencers despite not having traditional face-to-face relationships. It helps to understand trust, emotional attachment, and perceived intimacy between followers and influencers. It can be applied by examining how interactions such as comments, stories, and direct responses strengthen parasocial relationships and contribute to digital relationship building. The results indicate that most Generation Z respondents maintain a distant relation with influencers, with only 15% reporting emotional attachment to influencers and 64% disagreeing that they trust influencers' opinions more than traditional advertisements. Theory suggests that strong perceived connections between influencers and followers may increase persuasion and audience vulnerability. Instead, the current findings indicate that although influencers have become central figures in digital communication, many users maintain a critical awareness of their content.

The findings also reveal that a significant minority of participants (39%) report negative emotional effects, including anxiety, pressure to keep up with trends promoted by influencers, and concern that influencer content can negatively affect their self-confidence. This supports existing literature on the psychological risks associated with influencer culture, particularly regarding social comparison and unrealistic standards. At the same time, 61% agreed that influencer–audience interaction has more negative than positive effects overall, well above the share reporting such effects on themselves. The interviews show a similar gap: the first interviewee, for

example, described harm to young people in general while saying she was not affected personally. This pattern is consistent with the third-person effect, the tendency to believe that media influence others more than oneself (Davison, 1983).

The second theory is **Uses and Gratifications Theory**; it fits this research because it focuses on why audiences actively follow and engage with influencers. It also explains followers' motivations, such as entertainment, information, social interaction, inspiration, and a sense of belonging, by investigating how these gratifications encourage audience engagement and relationship formation.

Despite high levels of social media usage and screen time, with 64% of participants spending five or more hours a day on social media, direct engagement with influencer content remains relatively limited (only 17% regularly follow influencers). This suggests that heavy social media use does not necessarily translate into active participation or strong behavioural influence. These findings are consistent with previous research arguing that influencer effects are not deterministic but develop gradually through repeated exposure and the internalization of certain ideals related to appearance, lifestyle, and success (Suparaku, 2026).

The findings of this study contribute to the growing literature on the social and psychological effects of social media influencers by providing a better understanding of Generation Z's relationship with influencer culture. While previous research has highlighted the potential negative consequences of influencer content, including social comparison, unrealistic expectations, misinformation, and ethical concerns (Ekinci et al., 2025; Di Domenico et al., 2026; Suparaku, 2026), the present study suggests that audiences are not necessarily passive recipients of influencer messages.

However, the study supports previous research regarding the normalisation of idealized lifestyles and their potential psychological consequences (Suparaku, 2026). Three-quarters of respondents (77%) agreed that many influencers present unrealistic lifestyles, which some participants connected to experiences of social comparison and negative self-perception. This aligns with previous studies emphasizing that influencer influence often operates indirectly through social pressure, construction of identity, and the reinforcement of digital norms rather than direct behavioral control (Suparaku, 2026).

Furthermore, 20 respondents (30.3%) agreed that they had bought products they did not need because of influencer recommendations, while 33 (50.0%) disagreed and 13 (19.7%) were neutral. This identifies a substantial minority reporting unnecessary purchases, but does not establish the overall extent of influencers' effects on purchasing behavior.

Additionally, participants expressed strong expectations for greater transparency and responsibility from influencers, with most respondents supporting clear sponsorship disclosures and increased accountability for influencer content. These findi-

ngs reinforce previous research highlighting authenticity and transparency as essential factors in maintaining trust in digital communication (Ekinci et al., 2025). The results also extend discussions on ethical influencer practices by demonstrating that audiences expect influencers to recognize their responsibility in shaping online environments and be aware of what they post.

The interviews showed more varied views: one interviewee felt that people should take control of themselves and not let influencers affect them, while others felt that seeing influencers live unrealistic lives and get what they want easily makes it harder to accept their own lives and what they have, leading to daily comparison. All three agreed that influencers should be honest and share realistic lifestyle recommendations.

Finally, regarding artificial intelligence, the findings reveal differentiated perceptions of digital authenticity. While most participants (65%) support some transparency regarding AI-generated or modified content, the largest group (39%) believe disclosure is necessary only when AI significantly alters reality. This suggests that these respondents' understanding of authenticity is nuanced: the use of technology itself is not necessarily viewed negatively but requires ethical boundaries and clarity.

Overall, this study supports previous research on the psychological, ethical, and social challenges associated with influencer culture, and it also highlights audience agency and critical awareness. Rather than viewing Gen Z as passive consumers influenced directly by influencers, the findings suggest that influencer impact is shaped by a combination of exposure, perceived authenticity, social comparison, and individual interpretation.

SECTION 07

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between social media influencers and Generation Z audiences, focusing on the psychological, social, and ethical dimensions of influencer culture. The findings suggest that while influencers remain significant figures within digital communication, their influence is more complex than a direct effect on consumer behaviour. Although many Generation Z respondents reported scepticism and limited emotional attachment toward influencers, a considerable number identified negative consequences associated with influencer content, particularly through unrealistic lifestyle representations, social comparison, and pressure to maintain certain standards of appearance and success these days.

The study also highlights that respondents expect greater transparency, accountability, and ethical responsibility from influencers on social media, particularly regarding sponsored content and digital authenticity. Their accounts associate influencer content with social comparison and perceived pressure. These exploratory findings describe experiences and perceptions within this sample; they do not establish causation or changes over time.

Overall, this research contributes to existing literature by emphasizing that Generation Z should not be viewed as passive recipients of influencer messages but as active audiences who interpret and negotiate digital content critically. Future research should pivot to examine the evolving relationship between influencers, audiences, and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence to better understand the changing nature of authenticity and trust in digital communication.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Appendices

Interview Questions

1. How would you describe the influence that social media influencers have on Generation Z's attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions of themselves?
2. What factors make you trust or distrust a social media influencer's content? How do you determine whether an influencer is authentic?
3. Do you think influencers contribute to unrealistic expectations about lifestyle, appearance, or success? If yes, how can this affect young people's self-perception and confidence?
4. Can you describe situations where influencer content has created feelings of pressure, anxiety, comparison, motivation, or inspiration among young audiences?
5. What responsibilities do you think social media influencers should have regarding the content they share, including advertising, sponsored content, and the use of AI-generated or edited content?
6. Although many young people recognize that influencer content can be unrealistic or commercialized, why do you think they may still engage with and be affected by this content?

Survey Questionnaire

Introduction shown to respondents: "This survey aims to explore how communication between influencers and audiences on social media affects digital relationships and audience behavior among Generation Z (ages 14–28), with a particular focus on its negative impacts. Your participation is voluntary, and all responses will remain anonymous and confidential."

1. Age (14–18 years; 19–23 years; 24–28 years)
2. Gender (female; male; prefer not to say)
3. Educational level (high school; bachelor's degree; master's degree; doctoral degree; other)
4. How many hours do you spend on social media daily? (less than 1 hour; 1–4 hours; 5–8 hours; 8+ hours)
5. Which platform do you use the most? (Instagram; TikTok; Snapchat; Facebook; other)

Questions 6–21 were statements rated on a five-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree", in five sections: interaction with influencers (6–9), digital relationships (10–11), impact on behavior (12–15), emotional and psychological impact (16–18) and overall perceptions (19–21).

6	I regularly follow social media influencers.
7	I frequently like, comment on, or share influencers' content.
8	I feel connected to some influencers even though I have never met them.
9	I trust influencers' opinions more than traditional advertisements.
10	I feel emotionally attached to some influencers.
11	I spend more time interacting with influencers than communicating with people around me.
12	Influencers make me compare my lifestyle with theirs.
13	I have bought products because an influencer recommended them, even when I did not need them.
14	I sometimes feel pressure to keep up with trends promoted by influencers.
15	Influencers affect my opinions about beauty, success, or happiness.
16	I sometimes feel anxious when comparing myself to influencers.
17	Influencer content can negatively affect my self-confidence.
18	I feel that many influencers present unrealistic lifestyles.
19	Influencers should be more responsible for the content they share.
20	Influencers should disclose sponsored lifestyle content more clearly.
21	Overall, influencer–audience interaction has more negative than positive effects.
22	To what extent do lifestyle influencers affect your lifestyle choices (e.g., fashion, travel, health, home, routines)? (not at all; slightly; moderately; significantly; very significantly)
23	What makes lifestyle influencer content feel authentic and relevant to you? Select all that apply. (personal experiences; honest product reviews; educational tips; consistent lifestyle focus; transparency about sponsorships; high-quality visuals; audience interaction)
24	How important is it for lifestyle influencers to stay focused on lifestyle-related topics rather than unrelated issues? (not important; slightly important; moderately important; important; extremely important)
25	Do you think lifestyle influencers should clearly disclose when AI has been used to create or significantly edit their content? (yes; no; only if AI significantly changes reality; I'm not sure; I don't want to answer; I don't know)
26	How would you describe your most challenging or upsetting experience with a social media lifestyle influencer on a social platform? (open answer)

A final item invited respondents to contact the author if they wished to take part in a follow-up interview.

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