

Study the Genz's perception of the illusionary life of influencers on social media in Ahmedabad city

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Generation Z perceives the idealized lifestyles portrayed by social media influencers. It examines how influencer content shapes views of reality, beauty, and success, and how it encourages self-comparison. A survey of 173 participants—mostly women aged 18 to 25—showed strong reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.893). The results reveal that many respondents see influencer lifestyles as unrealistic and overly materialistic, showing only the positive sides of life. Participants often felt pressured to compare themselves with influencers, reflecting ideas from Social Comparison and Cultivation theories. Yet, despite recognizing the lack of authenticity, many still follow influencers and find their content motivating. Overall, influencer culture has two sides: it can inspire personal growth but also trigger feelings of inadequacy and unrealistic expectations. The study highlights the need for better digital literacy, more authentic influencer communication, and greater awareness of social media's psychological effects. These insights can help educators, marketers, policymakers, and mental health professionals support healthier online engagement.

KEYWORDS

Influencer Culture, Social Media, Perception, Social Comparison, Digital Lifestyle

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Study

The 21st century has transformed how people connect, communicate, and express their social identities. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Snapchat have become central spaces where entertainment, marketing, and interaction merge (Vidani, 2015). Within this landscape, social media influencers play a powerful role. By creating content, building personal brands, and engaging large audiences, they shape fashion, lifestyle trends, and even consumer choices (Vidani & Solanki, 2015).

Generation Z—those born between 1997 and 2012—is the first generation to grow up fully immersed in the digital world. Unlike earlier generations who adapted to technology, Gen Z has lived with it from the start, earning them the title of “digital natives” (Vidani, 2015). They are skeptical of traditional advertising and value authenticity, forming a complex relationship with influencers. While they follow influencers for ideas, entertainment, and social connection, they are also aware that much of what they see online is curated and not entirely real (Vidani, 2015).

In India, influencer culture has expanded rapidly over the past decade, particularly in urban and mid-sized cities (Vidani, 2015). Ahmedabad—one of the country's fastest-

growing cities with a vibrant youth population and active digital presence—offers an ideal setting to explore how Gen Z perceives the “illusory life” of influencers (Solanki & Vidani, 2016). Unlike Western contexts, India’s influencer scene is shaped by cultural values, traditions, and aspirations, providing a unique lens to study the balance between digital illusion and reality (Vidani, 2016).

B. Influencer Culture and the Illusion of Lifestyle

Influencers often showcase a selectively edited version of their lives—featuring luxury, travel, beauty, and success. This creates what can be described as an “illusory life” (Bhatt, Patel, & Vidani, 2017). While such portrayals can motivate and entertain audiences, they also raise concerns about authenticity, relatability, and the emotional effects of constantly viewing idealized realities online.

C. Influencer Communication and Theoretical Perspectives

Recent studies show that audiences increasingly recognize that influencer content is not spontaneous but strategically crafted (Niyati & Vidani, 2016). Behind each post often lie brand partnerships, professional editing, and deliberate storytelling (Penttinen, 2025). Some influencers share personal struggles, yet even these moments are carefully managed to maintain their appeal. For Generation Z, this creates a paradox—they seek authenticity but remain drawn to the polished, idealized versions of life influencers present (Pradhan, Tshogay, & Vidani, 2016).

In Ahmedabad, where young people navigate a balance between global ambitions and traditional values, this tension becomes even more relevant (Modi, Harkani, Radadiya, & Vidani, 2016). While international lifestyles may inspire them, local cultural and financial contexts often ground their aspirations. Understanding how Gen Z interprets influencer content is therefore crucial—not merely as entertainment, but as something that shapes their identities, values, and future goals (Vidani, 2016).

Several theories help explain why influencers remain so persuasive, even when their content is partly constructed. Language Expectancy and Emotional Contagion theories suggest that people respond not only to what influencers say but also to how they say it—the tone, humor, and emotional expression they use (Mala, Vidani, & Solanki, 2016). The illusion, then, is reinforced not just through visuals but through style and language.

Social Identity Theory proposes that when followers identify with an influencer’s community, they are more likely to trust their opinions or make similar choices (Farivar & Wang, 2022; Dhere, Vidani, & Solanki, 2016). This sense of belonging strengthens the influencer’s impact.

Para social Interaction and Social Cognitive Theory add another layer: when influencers reveal personal weaknesses or emotions, followers often form one-sided emotional bonds, feeling as though they know them personally (Penttinen, 2025; Singh & Vidani, 2016). According to social cognitive theory, audiences may even imitate these behaviors (Vidani & Plaha, 2016). In Ahmedabad’s context, Gen Z may view such disclosures as sincere—even when they are strategically performed.

Finally, Mind Perception and Blame Judgment studies show that even virtual or AI-

generated influencers are sometimes perceived as real individuals, highlighting how easily audiences form emotional and moral connections with digital figures.

Continuation of Theoretical Perspectives: Virtual Influence and Audience Perception

As technology advances, virtual influencers—AI-generated personalities—are becoming more common (Joel-Edgar et al., 2025). For Generation Z, this raises intriguing questions: are AI influencers less trustworthy than real people, or does human imperfection actually make influencers more relatable and authentic?

Uses and Gratification & the Uncanny Valley.

Research by Lou et al. (2022) shows that people follow virtual influencers for entertainment, novelty, beauty, and interaction (Solanki & Vidani, 2016). Interestingly, even when audiences are aware that these influencers are artificial, they continue to engage with them (Vidani, 2016). This suggests that followers can enjoy and emotionally connect with something they know is unreal, appreciating the creativity behind it.

Representation and Inclusion.

According to Meston and Williams (2024), influencers from diverse or marginalized backgrounds often earn higher trust because they reflect broader perspectives and experiences (Vidani, Chack, & Rathod, 2017). For Indian Gen Z audiences, authenticity may therefore depend less on whether an influencer is “real” or “virtual,” and more on how inclusive, relatable, and culturally relevant they appear (Vidani, 2018).

Together, these perspectives show how illusion, authenticity, and identity are deeply interconnected in influencer communication (Biharani & Vidani, 2018).

D. Global Insights on Authenticity vs. Illusion

Global research reveals several consistent patterns in how influencer culture operates:

Illusion drives success. Popularity often comes from style, storytelling, and image management more than from genuine expertise (Vidani, 2018).

Vulnerability as strategy. Displaying “imperfections” can make influencers appear more relatable, even when such openness is carefully staged (Odedra, Rabadiya, & Vidani, 2018).

Embracing fabrication. Virtual influencers demonstrate that audiences can knowingly enjoy and engage with artificial personas (Vasveliya & Vidani, 2019).

Identity and belonging. Feeling part of an influencer’s community strongly shapes how followers respond (Sachaniya, Vora, & Vidani, 2019).

Representation matters. Inclusive and diverse representation enhances both credibility and emotional connection.

However, much of this research focuses on Western audiences. Studies exploring these dynamics in India—particularly in emerging urban centers like Ahmedabad—remain limited.

E. The Indian and Ahmedabad Context

India is one of the world's fastest-growing social media markets, with Instagram and YouTube leading in popularity (Vidani, 2019). Indian influencers work across diverse areas such as fashion, fitness, travel, comedy, and education, attracting millions of young followers. Ahmedabad, Gujarat's largest city, offers a rich context for studying how Gen Z perceives influencers. The city's young population plays a major role in shaping local trends, and widespread smartphone and internet access fuels high digital engagement. Young Amdavadis often balance traditional Gujarati values with a modern, global mindset, and their preferences influence family decisions on fashion, food, and technology (Vidani, Jacob, & Patel, 2019).

These factors make Ahmedabad an ideal setting to explore how India's Gen Z interprets influencer culture—where global aspirations meet local traditions, and where authenticity, illusion, and identity constantly intersect. Despite these developments, there is still limited academic research on how Ahmedabad's youth truly perceive influencers—whether they admire them, critique them, or dismiss them as inauthentic (Vidani J. N., 2016)

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

A. To explore Gen Z's perception of influencer lifestyles

This objective aims to understand whether Gen Z views influencers as portraying idealized or unrealistic versions of their lives and whether these online personas appear more glamorous than reality.

B. To assess Gen Z's ability to identify authenticity online

This explores how effectively Gen Z can distinguish genuine content from staged or edited influencer posts, and how they evaluate the authenticity of sponsored or promotional material.

C. To evaluate the influence of influencers on Gen Z's values and lifestyle goals

This examines how influencers' self-presentation shapes Gen Z's perceptions of success, aspirations, and tendencies to compare their lives with those of influencers.

D. To understand Gen Z's trust and emotional connection with influencers

This objective investigates whether Gen Z feels a sense of trust, belonging, or community with influencers—particularly those who share honest and vulnerable experiences compared to those who project constant perfection.

E. To analyze Gen Z's views on the psychological impact of influencer culture

This seeks to understand how curated and illusionary influencer lifestyles may affect young people's mental well-being, including feelings of pressure, inadequacy, or self-comparison.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Introduction to Influencer Marketing*

Influencer marketing has become one of the most powerful forms of communication in today's digital world (Vidani & Singh, 2017). Unlike traditional celebrities, social media influencers build their fame by crafting personal brands, sharing glimpses of their daily lives, and engaging directly with their followers. Through relatable storytelling, they come across as authentic and approachable. However, much of their content is strategically managed, often presenting an idealized version of life that hides ordinary flaws and imperfections—what researchers describe as an “illusory life” (Vidani & Pathak, 2016).

For Generation Z, who have grown up surrounded by digital media, influencers play a complex dual role. On one hand, they serve as role models who inspire creativity and ambition. On the other, they can unintentionally fuel frustration or self-doubt when their seemingly perfect lifestyles feel unattainable. This tension has led scholars to explore how authenticity, illusion, identity, and parasocial relationships intersect within influencer culture (Pathak & Vidani, 2016). This review integrates theories and findings from global studies on influencer communication, illusion, and authenticity, focusing on six key articles. It also contextualizes these insights within Gen Z's digital behavior and the Indian online landscape, highlighting why a focused study on Ahmedabad's youth is both timely and necessary (Vidani & Plaha, 2017).

B. *The Rise of Social Media Influencers*

A social media influencer is broadly defined as an individual who uses digital platforms to create content, foster a community, and influence the attitudes or choices of their audience (Freberg et al., 2011). Their impact often stems from their perceived authenticity and relatability—qualities that distinguish them from traditional celebrities (Vidani J. N., 2020). Yet behind this approachable image lies a well-curated, strategic, and increasingly commercialized process of self-presentation. With influencer marketing now a billion-dollar global industry (Boerman, 2020), brands are increasingly relying on influencers to reach and engage digital audiences. Influencers blend personal storytelling with subtle brand promotion, making advertisements appear as natural extensions of everyday life (Vidani J. N., 2018). For Generation Z, influencers are more than entertainers; they are cultural figures who shape opinions and trends across fashion, lifestyle, politics, and social behavior. However, this carefully curated “illusory life” also brings challenges. It can foster unrealistic expectations, drive consumerism, and affect mental well-being, prompting important questions about the balance between digital aspiration and authenticity.

C. *Theoretical Perspectives on Influencer Communication*

Language Expectancy and Emotional Contagion: Studies show that how influencers communicate—their tone, humor, and emotional expression—can often be more influential than the content itself (Vidani & Dholakia, 2020). According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), subtle cues in speech and delivery can significantly shape how audiences interpret messages. Language Expectancy Theory (Burgoon, 1995) adds that audiences have certain expectations about how influencers should speak; when these expectations are met or broken, it can enhance or weaken the influencer's impact. Another

key concept, Emotional Contagion, explains how an influencer's mood—whether excitement, happiness, or vulnerability—can spread to their followers. This suggests that the illusion influencers create extends beyond visuals to include their language, tone, and emotional energy.

Social Identity Theory: Social Identity Theory (Farivar & Wang, 2022) highlights how followers often feel a sense of belonging to an influencer's community, which builds loyalty and shapes consumer behavior. Through personal storytelling and interactive content, influencers create spaces that make followers feel part of an intimate, shared experience—even when millions are involved (Vidani, Meghrajani, & Siddarth, 2023; Rathod, Meghrajani, & Vidani, 2022). This emotional bond strengthens identification with the influencer and makes their opinions and endorsements more persuasive.

Parasocial Interaction and Social Cognitive Theory: Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956) explains how audiences form one-sided emotional relationships with media personalities. Similarly, Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001) suggests that people learn behaviors by observing others (Vidani & Das, 2021). Influencers often share personal stories or emotions to appear authentic, which fosters trust and connection (Penttinen, 2025). However, this "authenticity" is often strategically curated—maintaining the illusion of closeness while serving commercial or image-building goals.

Mind Perception and Blame Judgments: Research on virtual influencers shows that audiences can perceive them as real individuals, influencing how much they trust or blame them for actions (Joel-Edgar et al., 2025). While human influencers are more likely to face criticism for mistakes, AI-generated influencers can damage brand credibility if perceived as manipulative (Vidani J. N., 2022). This shift demonstrates that illusion in influencer culture now extends beyond human behavior into the realm of digital personas.

Uses and Gratification and the Uncanny Valley: Applying Uses and Gratification Theory, Lou et al. (2022) found that followers engage with virtual influencers for entertainment, novelty, social connection, and visual appeal. Interestingly, many audiences acknowledge that these figures are artificial yet continue to enjoy their content—embracing what researchers call "genuine fakeness" (Saxena & Vidani, 2023). This reveals how Generation Z can consciously appreciate the creativity of digital illusions, blurring the line between authenticity and artifice.

Representation and Inclusivity: Meston and Williams (2024) emphasize that authenticity is not only about honesty—it is also about representation. Influencers who reflect diverse identities, such as non-binary or marginalized groups, often gain stronger trust and connection from audiences (Vidani, Das, Meghrajani, & Singh, 2023). Even when their content is curated, showing inclusivity and cultural awareness allows influencers to appear more genuine and socially relevant. Representation, therefore, plays a vital role in bridging the gap between illusion and authenticity, making followers feel seen and valued.

D. Global Trends in Authenticity and Illusion

The Authenticity Paradox: While audiences want influencers to appear "real," they are still drawn to polished, aesthetically pleasing content (Abidin, 2018). To maintain credibility, many influencers balance glamorous posts with small, relatable imperfections—offering just enough vulnerability to seem human (Vidani, Das, Meghrajani, & Chaudasi, 2023).

For Generation Z, authenticity doesn't necessarily mean complete transparency; it often means being relatable and emotionally accessible, even within the boundaries of performance.

Commercialization and Trust: As influencers increasingly collaborate with brands, the boundary between personal expression and advertising has blurred. Sponsored posts can sometimes appear insincere, reducing audience trust (Evans et al., 2017). However, when influencers integrate brand messages naturally into their storytelling—making promotions feel like part of their everyday life—followers still perceive them as authentic (Bansal, Pophalkar, & Vidani, 2023). Thus, commercial success depends on how seamlessly influencers merge marketing with personal narrative.

Virtual Influencers and the Future of Illusion: Virtual influencers represent a new stage in digital culture, where the idea of "realness" itself becomes a creative construct (Chaudhary, Patel, & Vidani, 2023). Though they are entirely computer-generated, these digital personas attract massive followings and collaborate with major brands. Generation Z's acceptance of virtual influencers—despite knowing they are artificial—illustrates a shift in how authenticity is perceived. As Robinson (2021) notes, this emerging trend redefines what it means to be "real" in online spaces.

Psychological Impacts on Followers: Constant exposure to influencers' selectively curated lives can lead to negative psychological effects, including body dissatisfaction, materialism, and self-comparison (Perloff, 2014). However, not all influence is harmful. When influencers promote positive, diverse, or health-focused messages, they can encourage better habits and self-esteem (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). For Generation Z, the impact often depends on how they interpret influencer content—whether as motivation for personal growth or as pressure to meet unrealistic standards.

E. The Indian Context

Growth of Influencer Marketing in India: India's influencer marketing industry is expanding rapidly, fueled by widespread smartphone access and affordable internet. Platforms such as Instagram and YouTube dominate the digital landscape, connecting millions of young users across urban and semi-urban areas. According to an EY (2022) report, the Indian influencer market is projected to reach ₹2,800 crores by 2026. This growth highlights how social media has become not just a form of entertainment, but a major driver of lifestyle trends, consumer decisions, and youth culture.

Cultural Hybridization: Indian influencers often blend global aesthetics with local traditions, creating hybrid digital identities where modern aspirations meet cultural customs (Senft, 2013). In Ahmedabad, this balance is particularly evident as young people navigate between Gujarati values and global digital trends (Patel, Chaudhary, & Vidani, 2023). This cultural mix reflects how Indian Gen Z shapes a unique digital presence that is both rooted and cosmopolitan.

Representation and Aspirations: In India's influencer landscape, representation is often limited to urban, middle-class lifestyles, leaving marginalized voices underrepresented (Sharma & Vidani, 2023). This selective portrayal reinforces the illusion of an idealized world that fails to reflect the experiences of most Gen Z audiences. As a result, many

young viewers see influencer content as aspirational but distant from their everyday realities.

Gaps in Indian Research: Despite the rapid rise of influencer culture, academic research in India remains limited, especially regarding authenticity and illusion. Existing studies primarily focus on marketing and branding outcomes (Kumar & Pradhan, 2020), with fewer exploring the cultural, emotional, or psychological effects of influencer engagement. Very few works have examined how Gen Z—particularly in cities like Ahmedabad—interprets and responds to influencer content (Sharma & Vidani, 2023). This gap highlights the need for localized, youth-centered research in the Indian context.

F. Generation Z and Influencer Perceptions

Digital Natives and Skepticism: Generation Z has grown up immersed in technology, seamlessly switching between digital platforms. They are generally skeptical of traditional advertising, which makes influencer marketing more persuasive. However, they also tend to question overly commercial or promotional content, expecting a more genuine connection (Turner, 2015).

Demand for Authenticity: Gen Z values honesty and relatability over perfection. They are drawn to influencers who appear real—even with flaws—because imperfection feels more human and trustworthy (Fromm & Read, 2018). Interestingly, even a touch of planned vulnerability can increase an influencer's credibility, showing how carefully crafted authenticity can still feel genuine to audiences.

Psychological Tensions: For Gen Z, influencer culture creates an emotional conflict: they admire the success and lifestyle of influencers yet recognize the performative nature behind it. This tension between admiration and skepticism often leads to feelings of aspiration mixed with self-doubt or disillusionment (Marwick, 2015).

Indian Gen Z: Generation Z makes up around 27% of India's population (Deloitte, 2021). In Ahmedabad, they represent a digitally active yet culturally grounded group. While heavily engaged with online trends and global media, their perspectives are still influenced by family values and traditional expectations. This blend of modern digital exposure and cultural grounding shapes how they perceive influencers—balancing global curiosity with local sensibilities.

Research Gap: Although extensive research has been conducted on social media and influencer culture, significant gaps remain in understanding their psychological and social impact across diverse audiences. Most studies focus primarily on young adults aged 18 to 25—the most active online demographic—while overlooking how older or younger generations perceive and respond to influencer content. As a result, we know little about how digital influence differs across age groups.

Another limitation lies in representation. Much of the existing research centers on female influencers and content related to beauty or lifestyle, leaving limited insight into how men, non-binary individuals, or those engaged in niches such as technology, fitness, or business interact with influencer culture.

Methodologically, most studies rely heavily on surveys, which capture surface-level opinions but fail to explore deeper emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. There is a need for more comprehensive research that combines quantitative and qualitative methods to uncover *why* people follow influencers, *how* they interpret influencer content, and *what* emotional effects this interaction has. Furthermore, very few studies compare different platforms—such as Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok—despite each having distinct formats, audiences, and influence dynamics.

Cultural and contextual differences also remain underexplored. Much of the existing literature originates from Western contexts, offering limited insight into how influencer culture functions in non-Western or developing regions. In countries like India, where social norms, values, and digital engagement differ significantly, these gaps are even more visible. Future research should therefore adopt cross-cultural, cross-platform, and mixed-method approaches to build a more complete and inclusive understanding of digital influence and to develop culturally aware strategies for communication and marketing.

IV. STUDIES AND METHODS

A. Research Design

This research uses a descriptive design, which helps explain and interpret how Generation Z views the illusionary lifestyles portrayed by social media influencers in Ahmedabad. The design allowed the researcher to observe existing attitudes and opinions without manipulating any variables, making it suitable for studying social perceptions.

B. Sampling Method

A non-probability convenience sampling technique was applied to collect responses. This method made it easier to approach participants who were readily available and willing to take part in the study, ensuring practical data collection within the limited time frame.

C. Data Collection Method

The study relied on primary data gathered through a structured questionnaire composed of close-ended questions. These questions aimed to understand participants' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward influencer culture and authenticity on social media platforms.

D. Data Collection Mode

Data were obtained online via Google Forms, which helped reach a larger and more diverse group of respondents across different occupational and educational.

E. Cronbach's Alpha

To ensure the reliability of the measurement tool used in this study, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated. The reliability coefficient obtained was 0.893, indicating a high level of internal consistency among the questionnaire items.

In general, a Cronbach’s Alpha value of 0.70 or higher is considered acceptable, while a value above 0.80 reflects strong reliability. Therefore, the instrument used in this research can be regarded as highly reliable for measuring the intended variables.

F. *Validation of Questionnaire*

Table1. Validation of Questionnaire

Statements
Influencers on social media portray a lifestyle that feels unrealistic.
I believe most influencers show only the positive aspects of their lives.
The content shared by influencers influences how I think about success.
I sometimes feel pressured to compare my life with the lives of influencers.
Influencers promote materialistic values through their posts.
I feel that influencers create a lifestyle image that is difficult to archive in reality.
Influencers are not transparent about their personal struggles.
Influencers set unrealistic beauty standards on social media.
Even though i know there may be illusionary, i still enjoy following influencers.
I believe the lifestyle shown by influencers motivates me to improve myself.

V. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

A. *Demographic Summary*

The study involved a total of 173 participants. In terms of gender, 73.4% of respondents identified as female, 25.4% as male, and 1.2% chose not to identify with either category. Regarding age, the majority of participants (87.3%) were between 18 and 25 years old, followed by 5.2% aged 26–32, and 7.5% between 33 and 40 years. When it comes to educational background, 68.2% of respondents were college graduates, 22.5% had postgraduate degrees, and 9.2% had completed higher secondary education (HSC).

In terms of occupation, 68.2% were students, 20.2% were employed professionals, 9.8% were engaged in business, and 1.7% identified as specialized professionals such as doctors or chartered accountants.

For monthly income, 54.9% reported earning less than ₹10,000, 33.5% earned between ₹10,000 and ₹60,000, and 11.6% had an income of over ₹60,000.

Overall, the demographic data reflects a predominantly young and student-oriented sample, which aligns well with the study’s focus on Generation Z and their engagement with influencer culture.

Table 2: Demographic Summary

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	73.4
	Male	25.4
	Prefer not to say	1.2
Age Group	18 – 25 years	87.3
	26 – 32 years	5.2
	33 – 40 years	7.5
Education	Graduate	68.2
	Postgraduate	22.5
	Higher Secondary (HSC)	9.2
Occupation	Student	68.2
	Employed Professional	20.2
	Business Owner	9.8
	Specialized Professional (e.g., CA, Doctor)	1.7
Monthly Income (₹)	Below 10,000	54.9
	10,000 – 60,000	33.5
	Above 60,000	11.6

B. Hypothesis

There is a significant relationship between age and the belief that influencers portray unrealistic lifestyles.

There is a significant relationship between age and the belief that influencers highlight only the positive aspects of their lives.

There is a significant relationship between age and the belief that influencer content shapes perceptions of success.

There is a significant relationship between age and the feeling of pressure to compare one's own life with that of influencers. There is a significant relationship between age and the belief that influencers promote materialistic values.

Table 3: Results of Hypothesis Testing

Sr. No	Alternate Hypothesis	Result (p =)	> / < 0.05	Accept / Reject Null Hypothesis	R Value	Relationship
1	There is a significant relationship between Age and the belief that influencers portray a lifestyle that feels unrealistic.	0.000	< 0.05	Reject Null	- 0.307	Moderate Negative

2	There is a significant relationship between Age and the belief that most influencers show only positive aspects of their lives.	0.069	> 0.05	Accept Null	- 0.019	Very Weak Negative
3	There is a significant relationship between Age and the belief that content shared by influencers influences thoughts about success.	0.015	< 0.05	Reject Null	- 0.059	Weak Negative
4	There is a significant relationship between Age and the feeling of pressure to compare life with influencers.	0.011	< 0.05	Reject Null	0.034	Weak Positive
5	There is a significant relationship between Age and the belief that influencers promote materialistic values.	0.000	< 0.05	Reject Null	- 0.242	Moderate Negative

This study aimed to explore how Generation Z in Ahmedabad City perceives the idealized lifestyles portrayed by social media influencers. Drawing on responses from 173 participants, the findings provide valuable insights into how young audiences interpret, engage with, and respond to influencer culture. The frequency and reliability analyses offer a deeper understanding of Gen Z's behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs regarding how influencers present themselves online.

The demographic profile reveals that a majority of participants were female (73.4%), while 25.4% were male. This indicates that women are more actively engaged with influencer content, whether as viewers, followers, or evaluators of online behavior. The age distribution shows that 87.3% of respondents were between 18 and 25 years old, representing the core of Gen Z. Smaller segments of participants belonged to the 26–32 and 33–40 age ranges. This focus on younger respondents ensures that the study captures perspectives from those most immersed in digital and social media environments.

Regarding education, 68.2% of participants held graduate degrees, while 22.5% had postgraduate qualifications, reflecting a well-educated sample capable of critical thinking about media and digital influence. In terms of occupation, 68.2% were students, and 20.2% were employed, suggesting that most participants are in a formative phase of their personal and professional lives. This stage is often characterized by self-exploration, goal-setting, and high exposure to social media influence—all of which make them particularly responsive to online trends and role models.

Overall, the demographic patterns highlight that Gen Z in Ahmedabad is a digitally savvy, educated, and socially aware group. Their interaction with influencer culture is not merely passive consumption—it reflects a mix of admiration, evaluation, and self-reflection shaped by education, social identity, and aspirations for the future. The income data indicates that 54.9% of participants earn less than ₹10,000 per month, suggesting that most are either financially dependent or engaged in part-time work. This aligns with the demographic profile showing that a majority of respondents are students or early-career individuals. When it comes to social media usage, 40.5% reported spending 2–4 hours daily on social platforms, while 35.8% used them for 1–2 hours each day. These figures

demonstrate that social media is deeply embedded in their daily routines, which helps explain the strong influence that online content and influencers have on their perceptions and behavior.

The survey responses reveal a blend of skepticism and fascination toward influencers. Approximately 43% of participants agreed that influencers portray lifestyles that appear fake, while 40% believed influencers promote materialistic values. Similarly, 56.7% felt that influencers create an unrealistic image of success, and 45.6% thought influencers often hide their real struggles. These findings suggest that many members of Gen Z recognize that influencer content is curated, filtered, and exaggerated. Additionally, 41.6% agreed that influencers set unattainable beauty standards, highlighting growing awareness of how social media ideals can negatively affect self-image.

However, despite this awareness, engagement with influencer content remains strong. About 39.4% of respondents said they still enjoy following influencers, and 42% stated that such content motivates them to improve themselves. This duality reveals the complex relationship Gen Z has with influencer culture—they are critical consumers who understand the artificial nature of online content, yet they continue to find it entertaining, inspiring, and sometimes aspirational. Influencer culture, therefore, functions both as a form of escapism and a source of motivation for young people navigating personal goals and identity.

The reliability analysis further supports the robustness of these findings, with a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.893, indicating a high level of internal consistency among the ten items used to measure attitudes toward influencers. This confirms that the scale effectively captures the concept of the illusionary lifestyle depicted on social media.

In summary, the results suggest that Gen Z in Ahmedabad maintains a balanced yet critical outlook toward influencers. They are fully aware that influencer content is often idealized and selective, but they continue to engage with it for inspiration, enjoyment, and social connection. This indicates that influencer culture plays a significant role in shaping how young people perceive success, beauty, and reality in the digital age.

C. *Cronbach's Alpha*

Test	Cronbach's Alpha	Level of Reliability
Overall Scale	0.893	High Reliability

D. *Perceptual and Behavioral Insights*

Beyond statistical significance, several perceptual patterns emerged. Approximately 43 percent of participants felt that influencers often present exaggerated or artificial lifestyles, and more than half (56.7 percent) believed that the image of success depicted on social media does not mirror reality. Nearly half of the respondents (49 percent) agreed that influencers promote materialistic values, while 45.6 percent thought that they conceal their real struggles. Around 41.6 percent of the sample stated that influencers set unattainable beauty standards. Despite this critical awareness, engagement with influencer content remains high. About 39 percent of respondents said they enjoy following

influencers, and 42 percent claimed that such content motivates them toward self-improvement. This indicates a paradoxical relationship—Generation Z recognizes the illusion yet continues to derive entertainment, connection, and inspiration from it.

E. Summary of Findings

In summary, the findings portray Generation Z in Ahmedabad as digitally aware yet emotionally ambivalent toward influencer culture. They understand that much of the content online is curated and idealized, but they continue to engage with it due to its motivational and social appeal. The statistical results confirm that younger individuals are more impressionable to the glamour projected online, while slightly older respondents display greater critical distance. Overall, influencer culture functions as both a mirror of aspiration and a trigger for self-comparison, shaping how young audiences perceive beauty, authenticity, and success in the digital era.

VI. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this research provide valuable insights into the growing influence of social media and its psychological effects, particularly among younger audiences. This study specifically examines how influencer culture shapes perceptions of success, beauty, lifestyle, and the tendency toward self-comparison. With a Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.893, the scale demonstrates strong internal consistency, confirming that the variables measured are closely interrelated and reliably represent how individuals perceive influencer impact. This reinforces the theoretical strength of the study within the frameworks of media influence and social comparison theories.

One key implication of the findings is their support for Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954). The data reveals that a large portion of respondents—particularly those aged 18 to 25 (87.3%)—frequently compare their lives to those of influencers. About 35.3% agreed and 14.5% strongly agreed that influencer content often triggers such comparisons. This tendency reflects upward social comparison, where individuals measure their self-worth against the idealized lifestyles displayed online. These results are consistent with existing studies showing that social media exposure can intensify feelings of inadequacy and lower self-esteem.

The study also extends the application of Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1976) by illustrating how repeated exposure to curated influencer content can shape perceptions of reality. More than 56% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that influencers portray lifestyles that are difficult to achieve in real life. This suggests that constant engagement with influencer material gradually cultivates beliefs in unrealistic ideals of beauty, success, and happiness. Such findings highlight how digital media, despite being personalized and interactive, continues to play a powerful role in constructing social norms and aspirations.

Furthermore, the results contribute to Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987), which explores the emotional consequences of the gap between one's actual self and ideal self. The study found that 49.2% of participants believed influencers promote materialistic values, and 45.6% felt influencers are not transparent about their personal struggles. These perceptions suggest that followers may experience emotional discomfort or dissatisfaction when comparing their real lives with the polished, idealized images they

see online. Recognizing this self-discrepancy underscores the importance of integrating emotional well-being into future theoretical frameworks that explore influencer culture and digital identity.

Overall, these theoretical implications demonstrate that influencer culture not only reflects but also reinforces major media and psychological theories. It highlights the ongoing need to examine how digital exposure shapes self-perception, aspiration, and emotional health, especially among youth navigating identity in an increasingly virtual world.

In summary, this study demonstrates that influencer culture cannot be fully explained through a single theoretical lens. Instead, it requires a multidimensional approach that integrates concepts from Social Comparison Theory, Cultivation Theory, Self-Discrepancy Theory, and Uses and Gratification Theory. The strong reliability score (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.893) supports the coherence of this integrated model, showing that these theories complement one another in explaining how influencer content shapes both perception and behavior. Together, they expand academic understanding of how digital influence affects psychology, culture, and identity formation in the modern age.

VII. PRACTICAL IMPLICATION

The findings of this study carry meaningful implications for social media users, influencers, marketers, and policy-makers. The results reveal that influencer culture significantly influences how people perceive reality, compare themselves with others, and shape their aspirations—especially among younger audiences, who made up the majority of the sample (87.3% aged 18–25). This highlights the urgent need to promote healthier online habits, critical digital literacy, and more authentic content creation.

For influencers, the study underscores the importance of authenticity and transparency. Nearly 45% of respondents felt that influencers hide their struggles, while 49% believed that they promote materialistic values. These findings suggest that followers are becoming more discerning and skeptical of overly perfect portrayals of life. Influencers who share a more balanced view—including their challenges and imperfections—can foster trust, loyalty, and emotional connection with their audiences. By presenting realistic experiences rather than flawless images, influencers can serve as positive role models and help reduce feelings of inadequacy and self-comparison among followers.

For social media platforms and marketing professionals, the results call for greater responsibility and ethical standards in digital advertising. With 56.7% of participants agreeing that influencer content often seems unrealistic or unattainable, there is a clear need to shift marketing strategies toward relatable, everyday storytelling rather than luxury-focused perfection. Platforms can contribute by ensuring clearer labeling of sponsored content, promoting mental health awareness campaigns, and supporting creators who engage in responsible and transparent communication.

Brands and marketing teams should also prioritize value alignment when partnering with influencers—choosing those whose personal ethics and authenticity match the brand's identity. Such collaborations not only strengthen consumer trust but also encourage a more sustainable and socially responsible influencer ecosystem.

For teachers and psychologists, the findings provide valuable guidance for developing programs that strengthen media literacy and emotional resilience among young people. Nearly 49.8% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they compare their lives with influencers, indicating the need for early education about the psychological effects of digital media. Schools and universities can introduce awareness campaigns and interactive workshops that teach students to recognize the difference between curated online content and real-life experiences. Such initiatives can reduce the negative effects of constant comparison, helping students develop a healthier relationship with social media.

Psychologists and counselors can also apply these findings by designing programs that address stress management, self-esteem issues, and unrealistic life expectations caused by exposure to idealized online lifestyles. Providing young people with coping strategies and emotional tools can help them navigate social media more consciously and confidently.

From a policy and regulation standpoint, the study highlights the need for clearer guidelines around influencer marketing. As influencer culture continues to shape how young people view themselves and make purchasing decisions, policymakers should establish standards that promote responsible advertising and truthful promotion. Ensuring that influencers disclose paid partnerships, avoid misleading content, and support mental health awareness can help protect users from harmful pressures to maintain unrealistic online appearances.

For everyday social media users, the research emphasizes the importance of mindful media consumption. While 42% of respondents said influencer content motivates them to improve themselves, many also reported feeling pressured by unrealistic portrayals. Encouraging users to balance inspiration with awareness—by setting screen-time limits, diversifying the types of content they follow, and practicing self-reflection—can promote healthier and more balanced online habits.

In conclusion, the practical implications of this study suggest that influencers, platforms, educators, mental health professionals, and users all share responsibility for building a more authentic, transparent, and mentally healthy digital environment. Promoting digital literacy, encouraging ethical communication, and nurturing emotional intelligence can help transform influencer culture from a source of unrealistic comparison into a meaningful tool for learning, creativity, and personal growth.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The findings of this research have significant real-world implications for social media users, influencers, marketers, educators, and policymakers. The study reveals how influencer culture shapes perceptions of reality, self-image, and lifestyle aspirations, particularly among young people aged 18–25, who formed 87.3% of the respondents. These results underline the importance of promoting responsible content creation, critical engagement with digital media, and healthier social media practices.

For influencers, the study stresses the value of genuineness and transparency. Over 45%

of participants believed influencers hide their personal struggles, while 49% felt they promote materialistic ideals. These responses show that audiences are becoming more discerning and expect authenticity rather than perfection. Influencers who share realistic, relatable experiences can build deeper trust, encourage positive engagement, and set a healthier example for followers.

Ultimately, the study concludes that influencer culture plays a complex yet powerful role in shaping modern identity and social values. While it offers inspiration and motivation, it also presents risks tied to self-comparison and unrealistic expectations. Recognizing these dual effects is essential for educators, policymakers, and creators who aim to foster a digital ecosystem that encourages authenticity, inclusion, and emotional well-being among today's youth.

For influencers, the findings emphasize the importance of authentic communication and transparency. Influencers can build stronger trust and connection with their audiences by sharing both the positive and challenging aspects of their lives. Presenting genuine experiences rather than a constant stream of perfection helps followers feel more understood and less inadequate. When influencers express vulnerability and authenticity, they not only sustain audience engagement but also set a positive example—one that reduces the pressure of social comparison and fosters healthier self-perception among their followers.

For social media platforms and marketing organizations, the study highlights the need for ethical responsibility and transparency in digital promotion. With 56.7% of participants stating that influencer content often feels unrealistic or unattainable, marketing strategies should shift toward relatable and authentic storytelling rather than idealized luxury. Platforms can contribute by ensuring clear labeling of paid partnerships, promoting mental health awareness, and featuring content that highlights everyday experiences. Brands collaborating with influencers should prioritize shared values and social impact over follower counts, focusing on building trust-based and socially responsible campaigns.

For educators and psychologists, the research provides useful insights for developing programs that enhance media literacy and emotional resilience in students. Since 49.8% of participants admitted to comparing their lives with influencer content, schools and universities can introduce workshops that explore how digital media shapes perception and self-esteem. Teaching students to distinguish between curated online images and real-life experiences can reduce the stress and self-doubt linked to social media use. Mental health professionals can also design targeted interventions to help individuals manage anxiety, low self-worth, and social pressure resulting from online comparison.

From a policy and regulation perspective, the findings underscore the need for clearer guidelines on influencer marketing practices. As influencer culture increasingly shapes young people's identities, values, and spending patterns, governments and regulatory agencies should develop standards promoting honest endorsements and responsible content creation. Requiring influencers to disclose sponsorships, avoid misleading claims, and support mental health initiatives can help safeguard audiences from the harmful effects of unrealistic digital portrayals.

Finally, for everyday social media users, the study stresses the importance of mindful and

intentional media use. While 42% of respondents said influencer content motivates them to improve, many also reported feeling pressured by the idealized images they see online. Users can maintain a healthy balance by being inspired without internalizing unrealistic expectations. Setting time boundaries—especially since 40% spend 2–4 hours daily on social media—and following a diverse range of content can foster a more balanced and positive online experience. In essence, these findings suggest that influencers, platforms, educators, mental health experts, policymakers, and users all share a collective responsibility to promote a more authentic, ethical, and emotionally healthy digital culture. Through honesty, education, and awareness, influencer culture can evolve into a space that encourages personal growth and genuine connection, rather than comparison and inadequacy.

IX. FUTURE SCOPE OF STUDY

This study provides meaningful insights into how social media influencers shape young people's perceptions of lifestyle, beauty, success, and self-comparison. However, given the rapidly evolving nature of influencer culture, there remains significant scope for further research to deepen our understanding of this phenomenon. Future studies can expand upon these findings by exploring broader demographics, diverse platforms, and more in-depth psychological dimensions.

A. Broader Age Representation

The present study primarily focused on respondents aged 18 to 25 years (87.3%), highlighting that younger audiences are the most active on social media. Future research should include a wider age range to examine how different generations respond to influencer content. For instance, adults aged 30 and above may value credibility, expertise, and informational content more than aesthetics or lifestyle appeal. Studying cross-generational differences could provide a more nuanced understanding of how digital influence operates at different life stages.

B. Gender-Based Perspectives

In this study, 73.4% of participants were women and 25.4% were men, indicating a gender imbalance. Future research could aim for a more equal representation to explore how men, women, and non-binary individuals engage with influencer content differently. Previous studies suggest that women are more likely to follow beauty, fashion, and lifestyle creators, while men may gravitate toward technology, gaming, or fitness influencers. Investigating these distinctions could help brands and communication experts design more inclusive and gender-sensitive marketing strategies.

C. Integration of Qualitative Approaches

This research primarily used quantitative methods, such as frequency analysis, which provide measurable insights but may not capture deeper emotional or psychological nuances. Future studies could adopt qualitative approaches—including interviews, focus groups, or case studies—to explore why audiences feel pressured to compare themselves with influencers or why they remain loyal to content they know is idealized. Combining quantitative and qualitative data could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the emotional and behavioral dynamics of influencer engagement.

D. Platform-Specific Analysis

Another potential direction for future research is to examine how different social media platforms shape perceptions of influencers. This study did not separately analyze the influence of Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, or X (formerly Twitter). Since each social media platform has its own unique features, audience behavior, and style of interaction, examining them individually can provide deeper insights into how different content formats—such as short-form videos versus long-form storytelling—influence people's emotions, thoughts, and engagement patterns.

In the future, expanding research to include a wider range of age groups, balanced gender representation, mixed research methods, and cross-platform comparisons can lead to a more comprehensive and culturally informed understanding of influencer culture. Such studies would not only strengthen existing theories but also guide ethical marketing practices and promote healthier digital engagement across different segments of society.

Each platform, including Twitter (now X), has its own audience behavior and influencer strategies. Comparing these platforms can help identify which ones are more likely to encourage self-comparison, lifestyle aspirations, or materialistic attitudes, offering valuable insights for policy-makers, educators, and content creators seeking to design healthier and more balanced online environments.

Additionally, the cultural dimension of influencer behavior remains underexplored. Because this study was limited to a single city, future research could expand to include multiple regions or cross-cultural studies to examine how cultural values, economic conditions, and exposure to global or Western trends shape how people perceive and engage with influencers. Such studies could reveal whether influencer impact is universal or varies significantly across different cultural and socioeconomic contexts.

Future research should also explore the long-term psychological and behavioral effects of constant exposure to influencer content. This could include examining how influencer engagement influences self-esteem, mental health, consumer behavior, and overall well-being. Combining psychological assessment tools with media and communication theories could provide a more holistic understanding of both the risks and potential benefits of influencer culture.

Moreover, researchers should delve deeper into the ethical and policy dimensions of influencer marketing. With rising concerns over misleading advertising, body image issues, and misinformation, future studies could evaluate the effectiveness of current regulations, such as advertising disclosures, digital literacy programs, and accountability systems for influencers and brands.

In summary, while this study contributes valuable insights into how influencers present idealized lifestyles, there is still much more to explore. By incorporating diverse populations, employing multi-method research designs, examining cultural variations, and integrating psychological perspectives, future research can build a richer and more nuanced understanding of how influencer culture continues to shape modern values, aspirations, and digital behavior.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to express their heartfelt gratitude to L.J. Institute of Management Studies, LJ University, Ahmedabad, for providing academic guidance and institutional

support throughout this research. Special appreciation is extended to Dr. Jignesh Vidani for his valuable mentorship, insightful suggestions, and continuous encouragement during every stage of the study. The researchers also wish to thank all the participants who generously took part in the survey and shared their honest views. Their cooperation and openness made this research possible and meaningful.

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