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Influencer Culture and Teenagers

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ABSTRACT

The rise of social media has transformed how teenagers interact and form opinions. Influencers, with large online followings, significantly shape teenagers' behaviors, preferences, and lifestyles. This study surveyed 45 teenagers to examine influencer impact, including social media use and engagement. Findings show that influencers provide entertainment and information but can also create unrealistic lifestyle expectations, social comparison, and peer pressure. Instagram emerged as the most popular platform, with daily use between 1–5 hours. The study highlights the need for digital literacy and responsible content consumption to help teenagers navigate influencer-driven content.

Keywords: *Influencer Culture, Teenagers, Social Media, Instagram and Digital Literacy*

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a central part of modern teenage life, influencing how young people communicate, express themselves, and perceive the world around them. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, and TikTok have evolved from simple entertainment spaces into powerful arenas where trends, opinions, and identities are shaped. Within this digital ecosystem, social media influencers individuals who have built large followings through their content play a dominant role in guiding teenagers' attitudes, aspirations, and behaviors. For adolescents, who are in a crucial stage of identity formation, influencers often serve as relatable figures, mentors, and even role models.

Teenagers today spend several hours each day engaging with social media content, making them particularly susceptible to the messages and lifestyles promoted by influencers. Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers appear more authentic and approachable, sharing personal experiences that resonate deeply with their followers. This relatability fosters trust and emotional connection, encouraging teenagers to adopt similar habits, opinions, and consumption choices. Influencers often set trends in fashion, beauty, fitness, gaming, and lifestyle, creating a culture where adolescents feel encouraged or sometimes pressured to emulate what they see online.

However, the influence of these online personalities is not purely positive. The curated nature

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of influencer content often presents an idealized version of life filled with luxury, beauty, and success—that may not reflect reality. Constant exposure to such imagery can lead to social comparison, unrealistic expectations, and a desire for external validation through likes and followers. Over time, this can contribute to anxiety, lower self-esteem, or materialistic tendencies among teenagers. Moreover, the blending of entertainment with subtle marketing where influencers promote products within personal content can blur the distinction between genuine recommendations and paid promotions, influencing teenage purchasing decisions without their full awareness.

At the same time, influencer culture also offers constructive opportunities. Many influencers use their platforms to promote awareness about mental health, environmental sustainability, education, and social justice. They provide motivation, inspiration, and information, helping teenagers explore interests and learn new skills. The dual nature of influencer culture offering both empowerment and pressure makes it an important area of study, particularly in understanding its psychological and behavioral effects on young audiences. In recent years, the role of influencers has become even more significant as social media becomes a major source of information, replacing traditional media for many young users. Teenagers often rely on influencers not only for lifestyle inspiration but also for opinions on current events, career advice, and social issues. This has expanded the influence of online personalities beyond entertainment into the realms of education, activism, and personal development. However, it also raises questions about credibility, authenticity, and the ethical responsibility of influencers who impact impressionable audiences. Understanding these dynamics is essential for educators, parents, and policymakers who aim to guide adolescents toward responsible social media use.

A. Review of Literature

Rushworth (2017) found that adolescents often perceive influencers as relatable figures who shape their preferences, consumption habits, and self-expression. Influencers act as modern role models whose credibility influences the attitudes and aspirations of young users. Abidin (2018) introduced the idea of a “micro-celebrity” culture, where online personalities gain fame through engagement and authenticity. This culture promotes imitation and admiration among followers, who try to replicate influencer-driven aesthetics and lifestyles. Such findings reveal that influencers play a significant role in shaping youth identity, values, and digital participation.

Research also identifies several negative consequences of influencer culture among adolescents. Chae (2018) observed that continuous exposure to curated influencer content creates unrealistic expectations and distorted views of success. Tiggemann and Slater (2019) reported that

teenagers often engage in harmful social comparison, resulting in body dissatisfaction and reduced self-esteem. These effects arise when influencers portray idealized lifestyles, wealth, or beauty standards that are difficult to attain. Such portrayals may lead to stress, anxiety, and emotional insecurity among young viewers.

Despite these drawbacks, several studies acknowledge the positive impact of influencers on teenagers' lives. Marwick (2015) emphasized that influencers can provide entertainment, motivation, and educational guidance through creative digital content. They promote awareness on topics such as health, environment, and social justice, encouraging teenagers to think critically and act responsibly. De Veirman et al. (2017) found that adolescents follow influencers not only for enjoyment but also to stay informed about trends, skills, and news. When consumed consciously, influencer content can foster learning, connection, and social understanding. Thus, social media can serve as a constructive space for creativity and engagement.

Emerging research also highlights the role of peer-mediated influencer interactions in shaping adolescent behavior. Lou and Yuan (2019) found that teenagers are more likely to be influenced by content that appears endorsed by peers rather than solely by the influencer, emphasizing the interplay between social validation and online persuasion. Similarly, Ki et al. (2020) demonstrated that influencer credibility, authenticity, and relatability significantly affect teenagers' engagement and trust in content, impacting their purchasing decisions, lifestyle choices, and online interactions. These studies suggest that influencer culture operates not only through individual admiration but also through social reinforcement, amplifying its impact on identity formation and social behavior among adolescents.

Overall, the reviewed literature demonstrates that influencer culture has both positive and negative implications for adolescents. It significantly shapes their attitudes, aspirations, and behavioral choices while influencing their mental and emotional well-being. Teenagers rely on influencers for entertainment, information, and identity-building, yet face risks such as materialism and peer pressure. The balance between empowerment and vulnerability defines the influencer-teen relationship. Building upon these insights, the present study aims to explore how influencer culture impacts teenagers' perceptions, decisions, and daily interactions within digital spaces.

B. Research Gap

Although social media and influencer culture are well-studied, few studies examine teenagers' personal perceptions or compare engagement across platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and

TikTok. Most research relies on adult perspectives or qualitative observations, with limited quantitative data from adolescents. There is also little focus on how different content types—entertainment, lifestyle, or educational—affect attitudes and decision-making. This study addresses these gaps by surveying teenagers directly. It analyzes their motivations, perceptions, and the positive and negative impacts of influencer culture.

C. Statement of the Problem

In today's digital age, social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok play a central role in teenagers' lives, exposing them to influencers who shape opinions, preferences, and behaviors. While influencers can motivate, entertain, and educate, they may also create unrealistic expectations, social comparison, and peer pressure. Most research focuses on adult perspectives, behavioral trends, or mental health, leaving teenagers' personal experiences underexplored. This study surveys adolescents directly to understand their engagement, motivations, and perceptions of influencer culture. The findings aim to guide responsible social media use and balance potential benefits and harms.

D. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine teenagers' engagement with social media influencers across platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok
2. To explore the perceived impact of influencers, both positive (motivation, entertainment, learning) and negative (peer pressure, unrealistic expectations).
3. To understand teenagers' motivations for following and interacting with influencers.

E. Research Methodology

The study collected primary data from 45 teenagers through a Google forms survey, capturing their engagement with social media influencers and their perceptions of influencer content. Secondary data from journals, reports, and credible sources supported the analysis. Responses were analyzed using basic statistics and presented in tables, compared with previous research. The study focuses on popular social media platforms in India, covering different types of influencer content, and highlights the positive and negative impacts of influencer culture on adolescents.

II. DATA INTERPRETATION

Table 1- Age of Respondents

S.No	Particulars	No. of Respondents	Percentages
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1.	Less than 17	6	13.3
2.	17-18	32	71.1
3.	19-20	6	13.4
4.	21-22	1	2.2
	Total	45	100

Source: Primary Data

From the above table, it is clear that the majority of respondents (71.1%) belong to the **17–18 age group**, which shows that most participants are teenagers — the main focus group of this study. A smaller portion (13.3%) each belong to the **below 17** and **19–20** categories, while only **2.2%** of respondents fall in the **21–22** range. This indicates that the responses mainly represent **teenage perspectives**, making the collected data highly relevant and accurate for analyzing the impact of influencer culture on teenagers.

Table 2- Education

S.No	Particulars	No. of Respondents	Percentages
1.	School	6	13.3
2.	Undergraduate	30	66.7
3.	Postgraduate	3	6.7
4.	Others	6	13.3
	Total	45	100

Source: Primary Data

The table shows that the majority of respondents (66.7%) are **undergraduate students**, followed by **school students** and **others**, each forming 13.3% of the sample. Only a small proportion (6.7%) are **postgraduate students**. This indicates that the survey mainly represents the views of young individuals who are still in school or early college years, which aligns well with the study's focus on **teenagers and youth engagement with influencer culture**.

Table 3 - Social Media Platform Usage

S.No	Particulars	No. of Respondents	Percentages
1.	Instagram	15	33.3
2.	YouTube	15	33.3

3.	Snapchat	10	22.2
4.	Twitter/X	5	11.2
	Total	45	100

Source: Primary Data

The data shows that **Instagram and YouTube remain the most popular platforms**, each used by **33.3% of teenagers**. **Snapchat** continues to be widely used (**22.2%**) while **Twitter/X** is less popular (**11.2%**). This confirms that teenagers mainly engage with **visual and interactive social media**, which are the primary spaces where influencer content is consumed. The high usage of Instagram and YouTube highlights their importance in shaping teenage trends, lifestyle choices, and perceptions.

Table 4 - Time Spent on Social Media Daily

S. No	Particulars	No. of Respondents	Percentages
1.	Less than 1 hr	8	17.8
2.	1–2 hrs	10	22.2
3.	3–4 hrs	23	51.1
4.	5+ hrs	4	8.9
	Total	45	100

Source: Primary Data

The table shows that more than half of the teenagers (51.1%) spend **3–4 hours** daily on social media. Around 22.2% spend 1–2 hours, 17.8% spend less than 1 hour, and only 8.9% spend 5 or more hours. This indicates that teenagers spend a moderate to high amount of time on social media, which affects their exposure to influencer content and its impact on their daily habits and lifestyle choices.

Table 5 - Purpose

S.No	Particulars	No. of Respondents	Percentages
1	Entertainment	25	55.6
2	Staying connected with friends/family	15	33.3
3	Following trends/news	3	6.7

4	Educational content	1	2.2
5	Shopping/product recommendations	1	2.2
	Total	45	100

Source: Primary Data

The table shows that the majority of teenagers (55.6%) follow influencers primarily for **entertainment**. A significant portion (33.3%) follows influencers to **stay connected with friends and family**. Very few teenagers follow influencers for **trends/news (6.7%)**, **educational content (2.2%)**, or **shopping/product recommendations (2.2%)**. This indicates that entertainment and social connection are the main motivators for teenagers engaging with influencer content.

Table 6- Imitating or Adopting Influencer Trends

S.No	Particulars	No. of Respondents	Percentages
1	Yes, Many times	9	20
2	Occasionally	22	48.9
3	Rarely	12	26.7
4	Never	2	4.4
5	Total	45	100

Source: Primary Data

The table shows that the majority of teenagers (48.9%) occasionally imitate trends promoted by influencers. Around 26.7% do so rarely, and 20% have tried to imitate trends many times. Only a small number (4.4%) have never adopted influencer trends. This indicates that teenagers engage with influencer-driven trends moderately, with occasional adoption being the most common behavior.

Table 7- Purchasing Behavior Due to Influencer Recommendation

S.No	Particulars	No. of Respondents	Percentages
1	Yes, Many times	23	51.1

2	Maybe indirectly	13	28.9
3	Yes, once or twice	5	11.1
4	No, never	4	8.9
5	Total	45	100

Source: Primary Data

The table shows that more than half of the teenagers (51.1%) have purchased products many times based on influencer recommendations. Around 28.9% may have done so indirectly, 11.1% have purchased once or twice, and only a small portion (8.9%) have never bought products due to influencers. This indicates that influencers have a strong effect on teenagers' purchasing behavior, with a significant number making repeated purchases influenced by social media recommendations.

III. FINDINGS

1. Most teenagers follow influencers for entertainment and staying connected.
2. Many occasionally imitate trends promoted by influencers, while fewer do so often.
3. Over half have purchased products based on influencer recommendations.
4. Some feel pressure to look or live a certain way, while others remain neutral.

IV. LIMITATIONS

The study has several limitations. First, the small sample of 45 teenagers may not fully represent all adolescents on social media, and a larger sample could provide more reliable insights. Second, the survey was conducted over a short period, limiting the number of participants and depth of analysis. Third, the results rely on self-reported data, which may include casual or biased responses. Fourth, most participants are from urban or semi-urban areas, so teenagers in rural regions may have different experiences. Finally, social media trends, platforms, and influencer content change rapidly, so the findings reflect the situation only at the time of the survey.

V. SUGGESTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the impact of influencer culture on teenagers, several measures can be taken. Promoting digital literacy helps adolescents critically evaluate influencer content and distinguish between genuine advice and sponsored promotions. Encouraging balanced consumption guides teens to manage screen time and avoid over-reliance on influencers for trends or lifestyle choices. Supporting positive content motivates them to follow influencers

who provide educational, motivational, or skill-building material. Raising awareness of risks helps teenagers understand potential negative effects such as social comparison, peer pressure, and unrealistic expectations. Additionally, monitoring purchasing behavior fosters responsible consumer habits by encouraging thoughtful decisions before buying products promoted by influencers.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study highlights the significant role social media influencers play in shaping teenagers' behavior, lifestyle, and consumer choices. While influencers provide entertainment, information, and motivation, they also contribute to social comparison, peer pressure, and materialistic tendencies. Survey findings show that teenagers engage with influencers primarily for entertainment and social connection, occasionally adopt trends, and sometimes make purchases based on recommendations. Though some feel pressure to emulate influencers, many remain neutral, indicating varying degrees of impact. Overall, influencer culture has both positive and negative effects on adolescents. Promoting digital literacy, encouraging responsible social media use, and guiding teenagers to critically evaluate content can help maximize benefits while reducing potential harm. By understanding these dynamics, parents, educators, and policymakers can support a healthier, balanced online environment for young users.

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