



Weber
Shandwick



INFLUANSWER
Arabia

Insights from
content creators
and influencers
in the Middle East
and North Africa

content

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About this report

In the modern digital world, almost all of us follow someone online for some reason. Over time, there have been changes – and constants.

Social media platforms have risen and receded. Influencer profiles have come and gone. Uses have evolved from sharing information and gaining a following to driving revenue and imparting influence. But the industry around content creation and influencer marketing itself has continued to go from strength to strength.

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, influencer marketing is experiencing significant growth, and Statista anticipates a compound annual growth rate of 9% over the next five years. Through multiple platforms, channels, and media, influencers are finding creative ways to connect with their followers, and brands are looking for successful ways to connect to those growing niche audiences through mutually beneficial collaborations.

Many related industry reports have featured the views and intent of CMOs and brand marketers, but few have specifically highlighted the thoughts of regional influencers themselves. We saw this as an opportunity to earn value by contributing value – to the people, brands, and agencies

involved – by inviting content creators to share their perspectives and analysing these responses.

The result is this report, offering a nuanced understanding of a dynamic landscape. It aims to elevate some of the common themes that are on the minds of MENA influencers, thereby also providing an opportunity for brands to build stronger and more powerful partnerships. It aspires to expand understanding of how influencers approach the creation and scheduling of their content, how they view the region, technology, and the growth of their business, and how they consider their societal position of influence. But above all, this report hopes to contribute to a deeper knowledge of the evolving influencer ecosystem in the Middle East and North Africa.

My sincere thanks to the team members in our agency for making this report a reality through their contribution – via great passion, endless curiosity, many conversations, and countless hours. I am also extremely grateful to the many influencers who participated – this report would not be possible without your willingness and openness to share your time and thoughts.



Ziad Hasbani
Regional CEO - Weber Shandwick MENAT

INSIGHT 1

66%

of influencers in MENA hope to develop a connection with the brand when attending an event, making this the most important driver for them.

Longevity and a meaningful relationship are goals

It's not just the content or collaboration that matters. Influencers are seeking long-term relationships with space for two-way learning and opportunities to develop a deeper connection with brands. When choosing a brand to work with, personal belief and creative freedom are the most important factors.

Influencers decide to attend a brand event because they hope to develop a connection with the brand (66%), have a high interest in the topic (58%), and look forward to a VIP experience (51%), with gifts of value (29%) ranking much lower.



Longevity and a meaningful relationship are goals

What does it mean for brands?

Consider sustained, ongoing partnerships that offer influencers the chance to integrate a brand into their content in more organic ways. Brands also benefit from this elevated authenticity through growing genuine affinity. By asking influencers for their ideas and recommendations to inform the brief, brands can build a stronger connection.

Maintain and build relationships with regular interaction and small gestures. Offer access to more stakeholders and more context. When inviting influencers to an event, include meet-and-greets with key people and spend time and budget on memorable experiences over things.

In their words

- More honesty is important, and greater credibility is vital.
- There is room for growth, sometimes it feels as if relationships are in decline.
- It's very fulfilling to see people fall in love with the brands we work with.



63%

of influencers in MENA have posted **more** about causes they personally care about in the past year, with 35% saying they posted **significantly more**.

Content, creator, and cause are closely linked

When making collaboration choices, influencers are becoming more mindful about their role in society, a brand's values, and the brand's perception in the Arab world. Events in 2023 have put several causes into conversation and mainstream media, generating deep introspection about how to balance personal feelings, passions, and beliefs with existing and potential future collaborations, as well as the perceived position or reputation of brands.

From climate change, escalating conflicts, and human suffering to small local business support and mental health awareness, influencers are feeling more empowered than ever before to use their voice not just for commercial gain but also for wider societal impact.



Content, creator, and cause are closely linked

What does it mean for brands?

As influencer marketing matures, it's important for brands to remember that behind the handle is a human with his or her own values, priorities, and community considerations. In any collaboration, brands should be open and considerate to potential personal impact or related changes, whether that involves changing timelines or the development of more nuanced content.

Finally, with influencers more vocal about causes they support, it may be easier for brands to identify and find collaborators that already have a natural affinity and deep connection to specific causes.

In their words

- We are more conscious about what we share and how we share.
- When choosing a brand to work with, we want to know more about a brand's work ethics, what they support, and if they have a positive influence.
- The way a brand perceives the Arab world and the way it, in turn, is perceived in the Arab world is a growing consideration before collaborating.
- We want to be informative and sensitive, and create content that is meaningful.

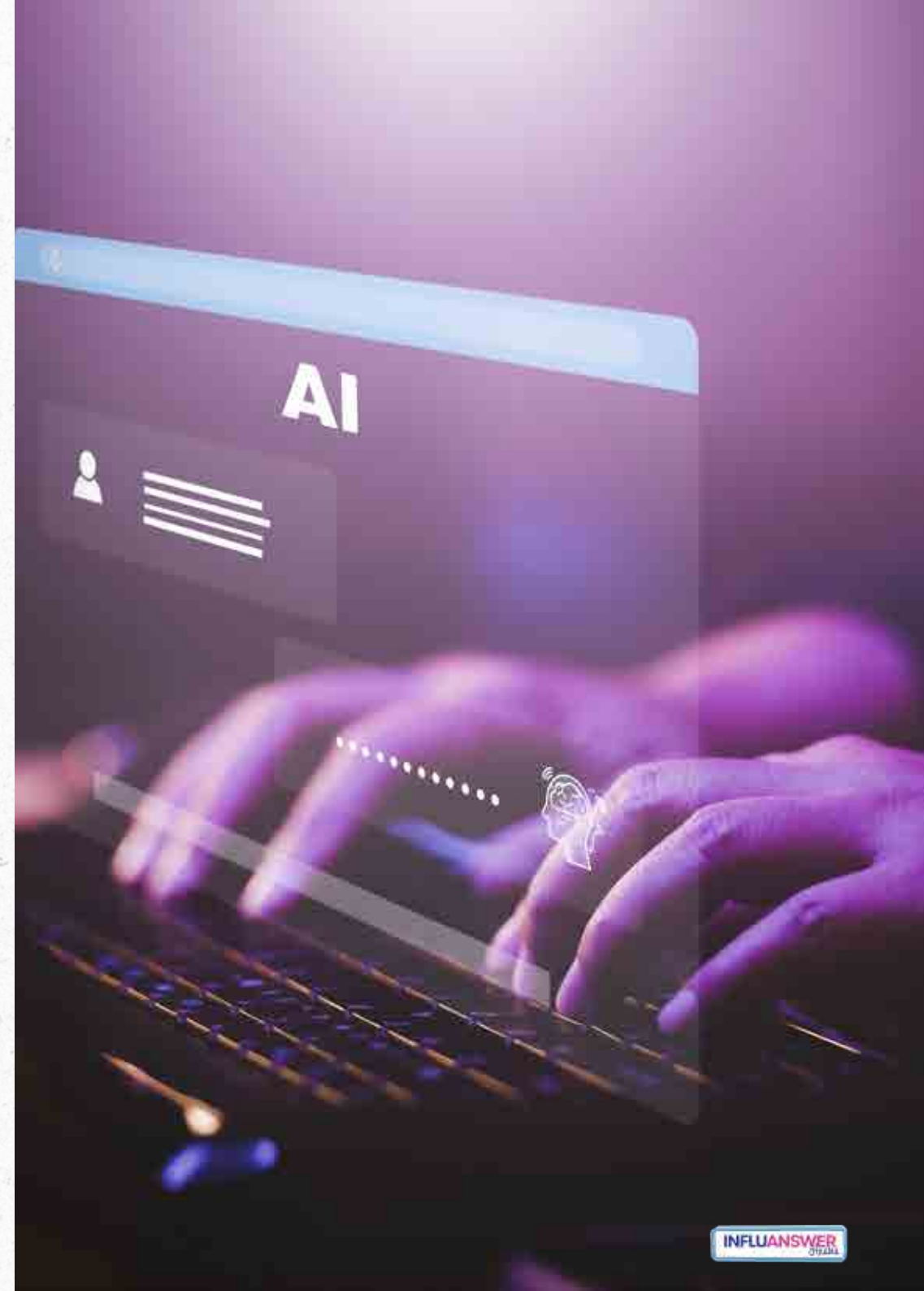
56%

of influencers in MENA say they are either neutral or uncertain about using AI in their content. The rest are **twice as likely to be positive** than negative.

Feelings about AI in content are still uncertain

Generative AI has had a massive year in 2023, permeating conversations across markets and demographics with talk of enhanced efficiencies and evolved creativity - but also misinformation, misrepresentation, and mistrust.

Brands continue to tussle with finding a balance and a clear position, and so do most influencers. When it comes to using AI in their content, over half (56%) are neutral or uncertain, though 29% are mostly positive, and only 15% are negative, with feelings that it's incompatible with authentic content.



Feelings about AI in content are still uncertain

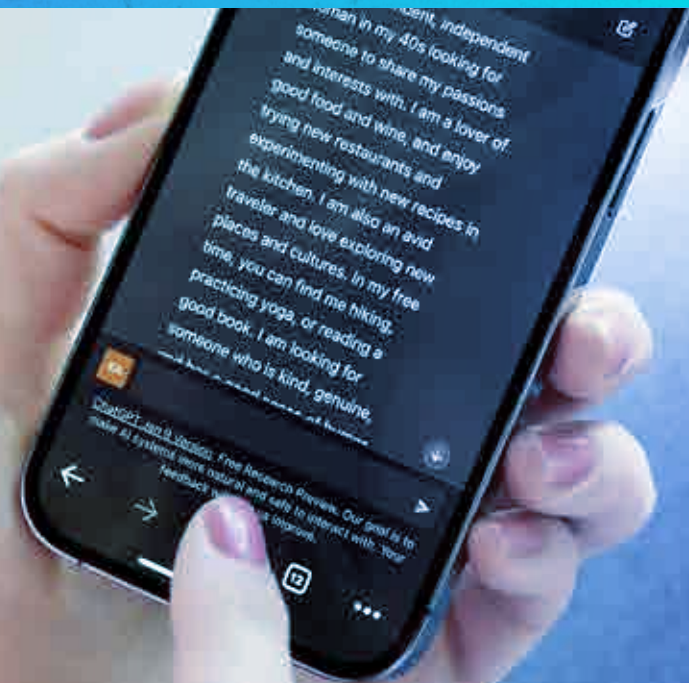
What does it mean for brands?

Like many brands, most influencers are also going through a process to ascertain how to approach AI. Whatever the pace, the good thing is that authenticity matters to them, and they want their content to reflect and retain a genuineness. As a result, more unpolished, raw, and lo-fi content may also rise.

If brands have a specific view or policy on how to use AI, it's advisable to share this in advance to simplify discussions. In the same way that some influencers indicate #ad or #collab with hashtags, we may see more #ai and #withAI.

In their words

- Generative AI will heavily impact how we create content.
- New technologies can fast-track production but also fast-track artificial profiles.
- AI is enhancing creativity – and possibly authenticity.



INSIGHT 4

68%

of influencers in MENA say they measure success through Reach, while 63% count on Shares as an indicator.

Reach and Shares show the way to success

Measurement remains a key topic in influencer marketing. Different campaign targets or collaboration goals will often mean a higher dependence on one metric over another, but ultimately both brands and influencers want to agree on how to measure return on investment (ROI) so that a partnership can grow.

While Reach is still the dominant way to measure success (especially for influencers in entertainment, music, and comedy), Shares reigns supreme as a success metric for content creators posting on topics like business, entrepreneurship, finance, food, fitness, and sports. The process of sharing content - and sharing feedback on content - also elicits an emotional exchange, in which both creator and follower gain something qualitative.



What does it mean for brands?

Content that is shareable (and saveable) wins the day most days in many topics. Influencers know what kind of content gets shared and saved, so it means measurement also has a link to creative freedom.

Think about shareable concepts with relevance to the brand sector, the topics your chosen creator posts on, the overall campaign goal, and, if possible, recent trends. Also consider ideal interactions and dynamic formats to maximise engagement potential.

In their words

- Success is the result of more than just one thing.
- The way people comment on content and about content is more important than any number.
- We build trust and provide brand awareness, not just sales.
- Results are tied to working with someone that has the right audience, rather than a big following.
- It feels like a major win when people stop us in public and share their thoughts about campaigns they have seen.



76%

of influencers in MENA rank an easy-going process, good budget, and creative freedom among their top three things for a healthy working relationship.

Process is key to collaboration

For content creators, an easy-going collaboration process is vital for a healthy working relationship. Interactions and next steps must be complementary, considerate, clear, and transparent – from the initial conversation to payment. A good budget also comes into play.

Creative freedom remains very important to influencers. They want to craft content that gets approved and also feels authentic to them. And because of the time and effort involved in redoing video, it's a major pain point for influencers when briefs leave out key info or critical details.



What does it mean for brands?

Find new ways of work where necessary to simplify and enhance future collaborations. Having a clear idea of the goal, what should (and should not) be included and how (and how not) to apply it can go a long way towards getting it right the first time.

Be clear, specific, open-minded, and allocate enough time so that agreed assets are created in a way that can generate authentic engagement for both brand and influencer. Share brand guidelines and relevant information, and then trust the creator you've chosen.

In their words

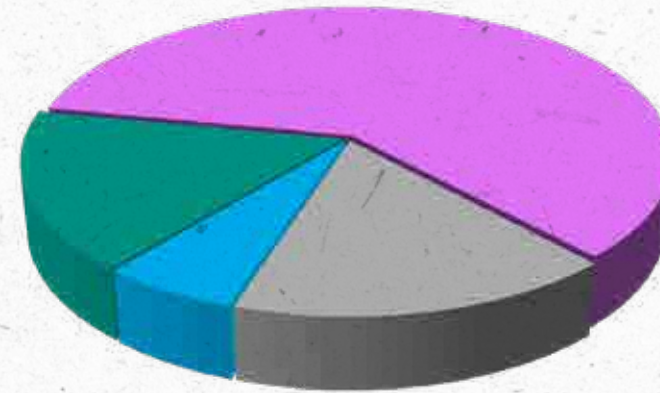
- We want clear instructions, specific details, and lots of flexibility.
- It's very frustrating when clear feedback only comes after the first take, in effect doubling the work.
- Making content again and again is a real pain.



How are MENA's influencers viewing the region?



SMALL BUSINESS PROSPECTS:



Influencers believe the best cities in the region to start a small business are:

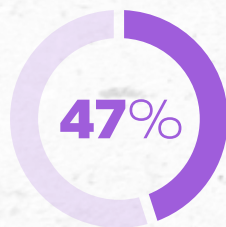
60%
Dubai

17%
Riyadh

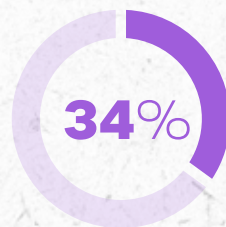
6%
Abu Dhabi

17%
Other

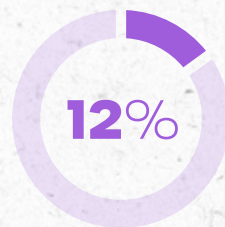
E-SPORTS HUB:



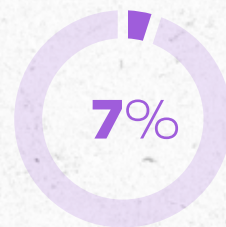
of influencers consider Saudi Arabia the "e-sports hub of the Middle East"



say it's the UAE



choose Qatar

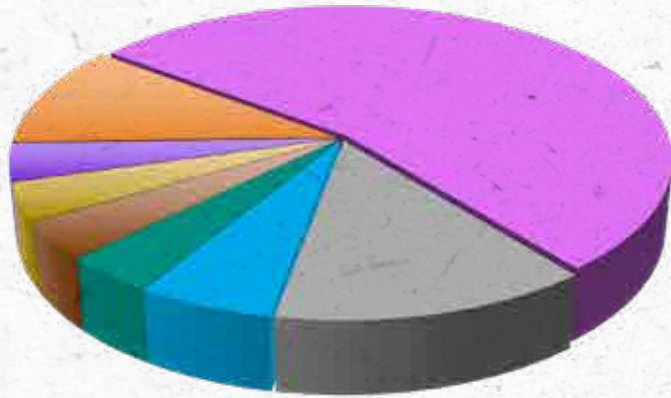


Other



How are MENA's influencers viewing the region?

MOST INSTAGRAMMABLE CITIES:



55% rate Dubai as the region's most Instagrammable city, followed by:

14%
Riyadh

6%
Cairo

4%
Abu Dhabi

4%
Beirut

4%
Jeddah

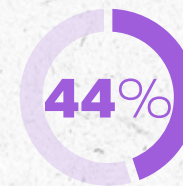
4%
Salalah

11%
Other



GLOBAL EXCELLENCE IN THE UAE:

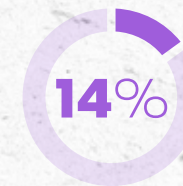
Areas where the UAE is excelling on a global scale:



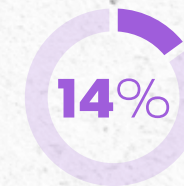
Tourism



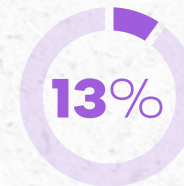
Smart Government



Technology



Sustainability



Other

Sustainable behaviours

78%

of influencers believe Saudi Arabia is presently the region's most exciting place for transformative developments.

69%

say they believe COP28 will lead to more sustainable behaviours and positive initiatives in the region as people and brands do more.

Transformation

Practical Considerations:

More Things Influencers Want Brands To Know

Most Engaging Channels

- Influencers in Saudi Arabia named YouTube as their most engaging channel, followed by Snapchat and TikTok.
- Influencers in all other MENA markets named Instagram, followed by TikTok.

Prioritise Authenticity

While feedback is appreciated, too much feedback too far into a campaign can be frustrating. Influencers want brands to be mindful of what 'fits', 'feels natural', and aligns with an influencer's own personality. Their feeling is that when a brand chooses an influencer, they choose the whole package: their personality, their style, the way they create, and the manner in which they engage with their audience.

Balance Clarity and Creativity

Many influencers reiterated the importance of getting enough time to develop content that balances brand-requested elements with personal creativity. They want clear instructions and specific details (dos and don'ts), but at the same time, they want room to explore unique ways to creatively package brand messages.

Preserve Cultural Relevance

The rich diversity in many MENA markets, especially in the Gulf, means influencers often use their channels to show and convey elements of their own culture, ethnicity, faith, language, and nationality. Influencers find some brand guidelines to be very restrictive in this respect and would like brands to be aware that choosing different timings, concepts, or platforms can help retain personalised content and cultural relevance. In one example, a brand refused to mention 'Ramadan' in a campaign that would launch during Ramadan due to global brand guidelines that prohibit the use of anything religious.

Check Suitability of Event

Influencers say they are sometimes invited to events that don't feel relevant to them, in terms of the topic, content, experience, angle, or visual pizzazz. When such a mismatch occurs, influencers feel like an afterthought, lament the wasted time, and resolve to think twice before accepting again.

Consider Payment Cycles

Some influencers mentioned they would like to see a shorter time between post and payment. Clear communication on payment terms, waiting times, and processes can help influencers to plan and avoid unnecessary admin along the way.

The Future: What Influencers Believe Is Coming Next

Regulatory Momentum

Influencers expect a stronger push from governments to enact and enforce implementation of laws regarding licensing, content, and pricing.

Longer, Lo-Fi Content

Longer videos, raw takes, and lo-fi content that has an air of unpolished imperfection will likely become more desired and some current platforms may transform into a new type of YouTube. There is appetite for less façade-like content that offers more relatable, real-life angles.

Superficial Influencers

The practice of buying followers, securing likes, and straightforward ad-like promotion will increase as competition increases, and as AI makes content creation simpler.

More Specialists, More Vetting

In addition to preferring specialised influencers over celebrities, content creators also expect a rise in micro and nano influencers. They anticipate brands will vet and investigate the influencers they work with – including the length of online presence, cadence, and quality of content, interaction with audience, and principles behind paid and non-paid posts.

Blending Commerce, Integrating Tech

Future content might integrate a lot more livestream shopping, new formats, and technologies, with a greater focus on being transparent and diversifying platforms.

Positive Influence

Influencers will think genuinely about how they can use and amplify their influence in a positive way while adapting their content to reflect how younger generations consume it.

CONCLUSION

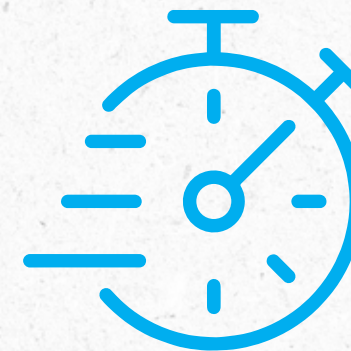
Themes related to authenticity, quality, competition, real connections, transparency, meaningful partnerships, and positive influence are recurring often. MENA's influencers have concerns, but they are also proud of their trade, the growing corporate recognition of their industry, and the potential for the future.

APPENDIX: Overview of Influencer Respondents

Notes

Weber Shandwick MENAT developed the questions and shared an email invitation with vetted influencers to participate in an online survey, hosted by 3Gem Research & Insights. A total of 142 complete responses were analysed by Weber Shandwick MENAT to produce this report.

Markets

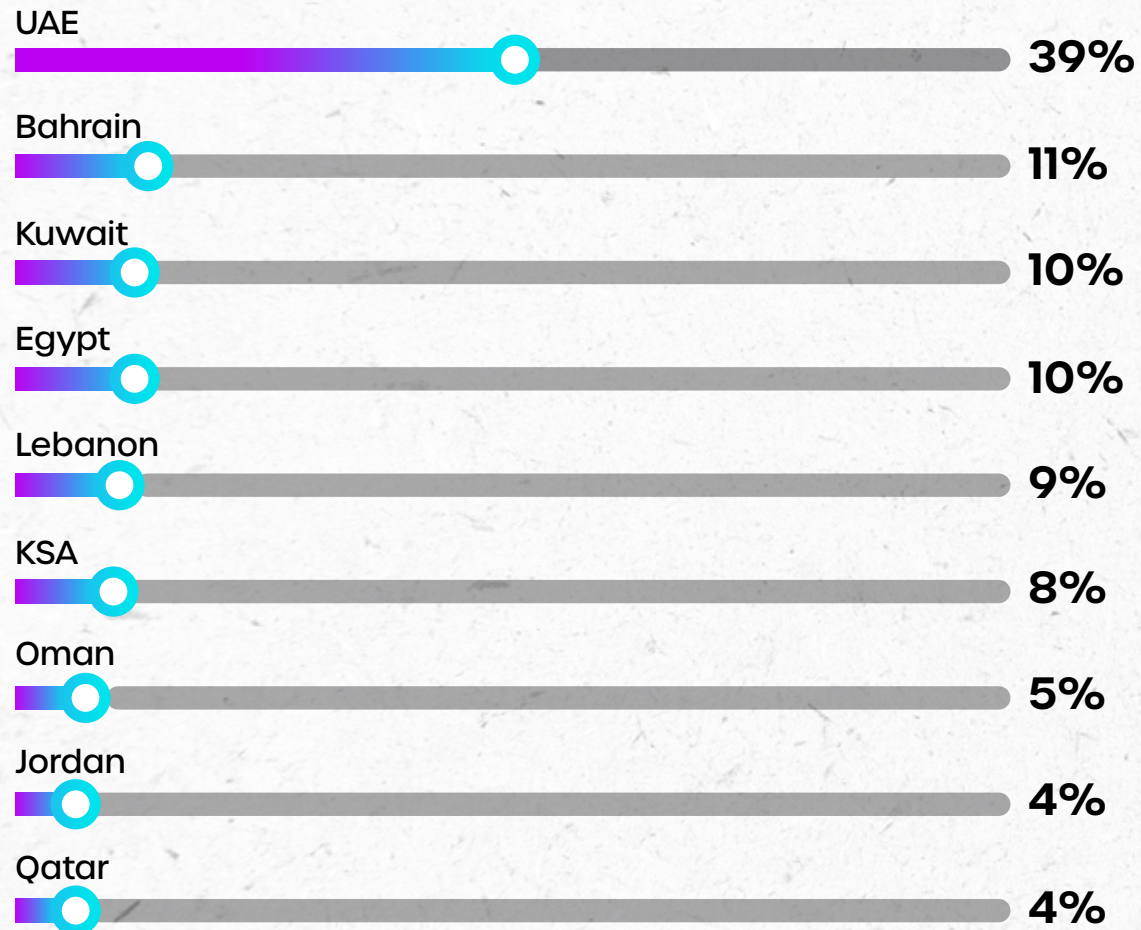


Timeline

Responses were collected between 3 January and 14 March 2024.

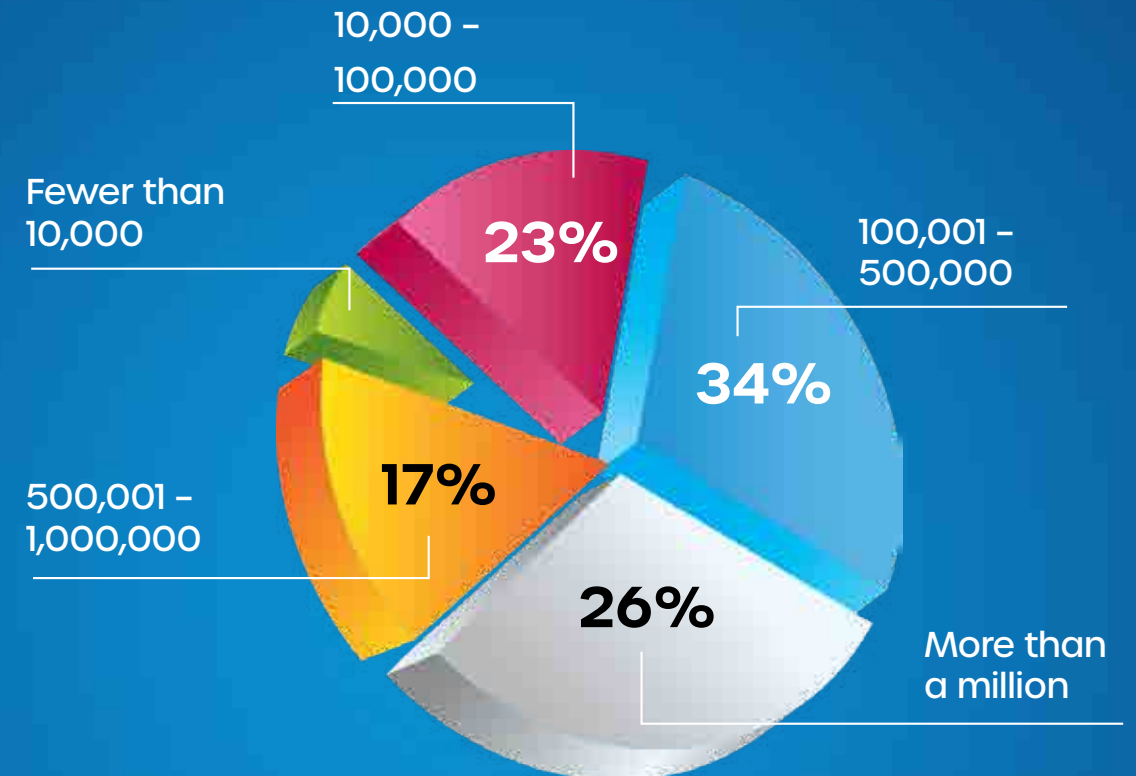
APPENDIX: Overview of Influencer Respondents

Sample Size



Respondent Followers

Over half of respondents have a following of between 100,000 and 1,000,000.



Respondent Audience

For surveyed influencers in Kuwait and Bahrain, over half of their audiences are in neighbouring Saudi Arabia and UAE, offering an interesting perspective on cross-border influence.





CORE CONTRIBUTORS

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