Media Manipulators: How Social Media Companies Are Creating and Exploiting Teenagers' Insecurities

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Media Manipulators: How Social Media Companies Are Creating and Exploiting Teenagers' Insecurities

Enoch KM[1], Williams RC[2]

Institution

[1]*Howell's School, Llandaff, Cardiff*

[2]*School of Modern Languages, Cardiff University, Cardiff*

Abstract

This article explores the adverse relationship between social media companies and their young users. It discusses how attempts to create a prettified reality by advertisers and influencers who use social media outlets as a platform to reach a young audience can encourage adolescents to develop hostile conceptualisations of their own bodies. It concludes with several recommendations on how we, as a society, can help to alleviate the harmful effects of social media on children and young adults.

Corresponding Author:
Rebecca Williams; E-mail: WilliamsR58@cardiff.ac.uk

How do we define beauty? Is it having shiny hair? Is it having a lean figure? Or is it having a flat stomach? With 95% of teenagers owning a smartphone,[1] it is rather unsurprising that social media is slowly changing the way we define our own beauty and self-worth. When using a personal computer, an average individual spends one-fifth of the time on social media, and he or she spends about 30% of the time on social media when using a mobile phone.[2] As an individual continues to consume social media, his or her body image becomes inextricably linked with the messages promoted through social media. Body image is defined as: 'the individual, subjective sense of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one's body or physical appearance'.[3] In fact, one is more likely than ever before to experience body shame and to be influenced by social media due to the fact that one is constantly exposed to certain body types.[4] A study by Heather Gallivan (2014) showed that 69% of females (aged 10 to 18) state that photographs of models and celebrities in the media motivated their "ideal" body shape.[5]

Social media is often free to download. Despite this, many social media companies are worth billions of dollars; Instagram was worth $100 billion in 2018.[6] The social media companies instil negative thoughts about body image into their young and impressionable audience's minds from an early age; social media tells young people that they are not pretty unless they look like a supermodel. As a result, teenagers are constantly searching for ways to appear 'perfect'. Research by Michaela Bucchianeri *et al.* (2013) revealed that body dissatisfaction increases during adolescence. In particular, teenage girls report higher levels of body dissatisfaction compared to males.[7] This means that the company can sell the data of its users to advertisers who will fill the teenagers' social media feed with their products. The products often seem to be "miracle cures" for all the teenagers' problems, boasting claims such as "Get smooth, soft, springy skin using this tool", as advertised by one facial-cleansing product.[8]

Advertising companies will also sponsor social media influencers. These influencers will then inform their young audience how great a product is, even though they might not have even used it. One example of this was seen in 2018 when Gal Gadot, a celebrity product ambassador for Huawei, tweeted about how incredible the company's latest product was.

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However, she made this Tweet from an iPhone (Apple is one of Huawei's largest competitors).[9] This incident shows that, occasionally, influencers might not use the products that they actively promote. However, when the teenager hears these alluring claims, he or she becomes desperate to purchase the product.

Such claims might also turn out to be fabricated, or at least misleading. For example, New Balance was sued for $2.3 million after it falsely claimed that its latest shoes helped to burn calories and build muscles.[10] Misleading claims leave the teenager feeling dejected as not only has the sensational product not worked, but the teenager's money has also been squandered. On the other hand, the influencer, advertisers, and the social media company all become richer due to many teenagers buying the product that was so heavily promoted to them. The fact that the product does not live up to the teenager's expectations often leads to him or her feeling worse about himself or herself. Afterall, he or she still does not look like their favourite model or celebrity. Clearly, celebrities do not really look like that either. The pictures that they post have been meticulously retouched, their body parts have been carefully reshaped, and their 'imperfections' have been discreetly removed. In fact, over 90% of adults admitted to editing a photo before they shared it online.[11] Teenagers are striving to mirror their favourite celebrities when they themselves do not look like that. Clearly, this is a cause for grave concern when it comes to the body image of teens.

According to Jennifer Mills, an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at York University, Toronto, "People feel worse about their own appearance after looking at social media pages of someone that they perceived to be more attractive than them".[12] Of course, celebrity photos will look more attractive than those of the average individual; they have been so heavily edited to make them appear stunning. When a teenager's young, impressionable mind is constantly bombarded with images of an unreachable beauty, it is hardly a surprise to hear that more than one out of three adolescent girls believe that they are overweight, whilst 59%

are trying to lose weight.[13] Yet, social media companies and influencers do not care about that. To them, young people are nothing more than cash cows.

It is, however, possible for social media to have a positive impact. For example, receiving encouraging feedback on a social media post will increase the users' levels of self-esteem.[14] Yet, most research shows, as highlighted below, that social media is more likely to negatively impact how one perceives his or her own body image. A study conducted by a healthcare institution, the Florida House Experience,[15] revealed that both women and men compare their bodies with those in the media. They surveyed 1,000 men and women on their confidence and their body image, as well as their relationship with the media. The results showed that 87% of women and 65% of men compare their bodies to images that they consume on social and traditional media. Out of those people, 50% of women and 37% of men compare their bodies unfavourably.[15] Another study asked 752 university students to complete a self-report survey, including the Instagram Addiction Scale (IAS), the Big Five Inventory (BFI), and the Self-Liking Scale.[16] The results showed that agreeableness, conscientiousness and self-liking were negatively associated with Instagram addiction.[16] Whilst having body image concerns is a relatively common experience and is not a mental health problem in itself, it can be a risk factor for a range of mental and physical health problems.[17] These can include low self-esteem, low confidence, anxiety, depression, poor self-perception and suicidal tendencies.[18] However, perhaps the most damaging result of these edited photos is one that affects around 9% of the global population: eating disorders.[18]

An eating disorder is defined as 'when one has an unhealthy attitude to food, which can take over one's life and make him/her ill'.[19] There are four different types of eating disorders: anorexia nervosa (when one tries to keep his or her weight as low as possible by not eating enough food, exercising too much, or both), bulimia (when one can lose control and eat a lot of food in a very short amount of time (binging) and is then deliberately sick, uses laxatives, restricts what one eats, or does too

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much exercise to try to stop oneself gaining weight), binge eating disorder (when one regularly loses control of his or her eating, eating large portions of food all at once until one feels uncomfortably full, and is then often upset or guilty) and other specified feeding or eating disorder (OSFED) (when an individual's symptoms do not exactly match those of anorexia, bulimia, or binge eating disorder, but this does not mean it is a less serious illness).[20] These disorders can have a devastating impact on the lives of those they affect. Research shows that those with anorexia nervosa have an 18 times higher mortality rate compared to their counterparts who do not have the eating disorder.[21] Another study also showed the destructive impact of the disorder; suicide is the leading cause of death in sufferers of anorexia nervosa.[22] Whilst there are studies that suggest that users of social media may feel decreased symptoms of depression,[23] many studies firmly contradict this assertion. A study by Ross Wilkinson *et al.* (2016) found that people with lower levels of self-liking are likely to have higher levels of depression.[24] High levels of depression are positively associated with social media addiction.[25] In fact, depression is expected to become the primary global burden of disease in wealthy countries by 2030.[26] An additional impact of eating disorders is low self-esteem. Sufferers may feel poorly about themselves, which can have an impact on other areas of their life. If they are constantly thinking about and hating the way they look, they will lack confidence. This will lead to them not achieving their full potential. These are just a handful of the harmful effects that a negative body image can have on an individual.

So, as a society, what can we do about it? Firstly, the elected officials and policy makers must stop letting influencers and celebrities edit the pictures they post online, as this exacerbates the aforementioned issues. We must also hold social media giants accountable for how they have damaged millions of teenagers' already fragile self-esteem. Secondly, we can try and limit our young people's exposure to social media as this may help reduce feelings of negative body image. The average teenager spends approximately nine

hours per day using media for his or her entertainment, according to a report by Common Sense Media.[27] During this time, his or her feeds would be flooded with images of stunning, lean people, lying on beaches and basking in the golden sun. So, expectedly, if young teenagers are constantly surrounded by these "perfect" models, they start contemplating their own beauty. Finally, we must support our young people. Research shows that the pressure to lose weight or gain muscle that adolescents experience does not only come from social media; it can derive from parents and peers.[28] Additionally, most young people obtain information about eating disorders and self-harm from friends or from online sources.[29] This can often lead to them receiving misinformation. They should instead seek the help of their parents or a trusted adult. Children should be counting to three and shouting 'Peek-A-Boo!'; instead, they are now counting how many calories they consume in a day. Millions of young people are striving for perfection when, in reality, perfection is a misconception.

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