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Social Media is manipulating our adolescents

We have seen an exponential growth and advancement in our society in the last 40 years due to the internet and social media. We can do so many things with this technology, like staying connected with our friends and loved ones as well as staying informed about what is going on around the world. Social media has evolved over the years from a place to exchange information, to a virtual community, a retail platform, and now it's a vital tool for people and businesses to be successful. The same technology that allows us to do all of this is also being used against us. It has become something like smoking used to be. When cigarettes first came out, doctors were recommending it like it was healthy for you. Years later, after several studies, we have come to learn that they are actually deadly. I think the same is happening with social media right now. Everyone preached about how good it was to make friends and remain connected with them and the world. Now, we are starting to see the negative effects social media is having especially on our young generation. The biases of social media platforms and the internet have made it challenging for adolescents to obtain objective information and form their own identities and stances regarding important issues of society. Therefore, making them easier to control and manipulate.

A key developmental milestone for adolescents is to forge an independent identity, according to Dr. Kennedy-Moore, a psychologist at Princeton New Jersey. Adolescents have

several identities they are trying to figure out including social, political, religious, or gender identity to name a few. This period of adolescence is a period of confusion, uncertainty, exploration, experimentation, and learning (The Great). These adolescents are absorbing information from all kinds of sources from their lives including the internet and social media platforms. The young generation of today, was born into the digital age and they don't know life without it. It has become such an integral part of their daily lives. They use it for schoolwork, to connect with peers, and to find a community.

With this new way of living, comes new problems as well. Parents have to worry about the content their children are viewing on these platforms because lots of it may be inappropriate. Another thing to worry about is cyber bullying and the effects this may have on their teens emotional health. The anonymity that comes with being on the internet usually brings out the worst in people.

Parents use some of these social media platforms every day too and find it hard to keep their usage in check. I imagine this would be even more challenging for an adolescent.

Social media usage can have negative effects on an adolescents development and this is why this subject is so important. Studies have shown that social media usage correlates with poor academic performance (Nair). This may be due to the lack of focus and attention span from using these platforms that feed entertaining six second videos. People scroll aimlessly through these and sometimes don't even watch the full video. Sometimes just seeing it for one to two seconds and skipping to the next one. This is terrible for a developing brain because it is interfering with the adolescents brain chemistry. More specifically, the neurotransmitter dopamine that is responsible for feelings of craving and desire. It can also make us act impulsively. This is why adolescents tend to grab the phone every second that they are bored, because they know they are

going to get a little dopamine hit as soon as they open up that social media app. They might see a friend's picture or someone they like, or maybe even a funny cat video. These things seem innocent, but there are multibillion dollar companies behind every bit of these platforms. Their intentions are not to help developing adolescents become better adults, they're only goal is to make the most money possible.

For example, instead of encouraging proper language development, these platforms have popularized abbreviated language like LOL or BRB. This is hindering our young generation from having the ability to give well-crafted responses in discussions. This is why social media is having a negative effect on adolescents ability to engage in bigger societal problems like politics. Not only that, many adolescents believe that what they see on social media and the internet is reliable information that they can trust. This is far from being the truth.

Google was a major influence on the development of social media platforms. Google started off as an index for information available on the internet. The Creepy Line documentary about google goes into detail about how it developed into a biased search engine that shows you what you want to see. For this search engine to be effective it has to be biased because we're often searching for the best product to use or the best doctors to see in our area. Algorithms are designed for this very thing. Google will gather information from our devices including our search histories, locations, and previous purchases. It then uses all this information to show us targeted ads as well as tailor our search results (Taylor).

A similar system was adopted by social media platforms. The reason these platforms were developed in the first place, was to connect people, but it makes people feel worse after spending time on it. As I mentioned before, the reason for this is that the most important motivation for social media companies has become making money and not the safety and

happiness of their users. Author John Green shares a noteworthy thought, “ When we are this reliant on a media ecosystem full of pollution, we have to take responsibility for what we read, post, and share. To do that we should really understand how social media networks really function” (John). We should start by understanding their business model. The reason these applications are free to use is because we are paying with our attention. We are shown countless advertisements in the minutes or hours we spend on social media. The algorithms used in these platforms learn about our likes and dislikes and everything about us to keep us engaged longer and therefore, show us more ads and make more money.

These social media platforms use behavior modification techniques to get people addicted to using their apps. This is eerily similar to the operant conditioning experiments done by the behaviorist B.F. Skinner with the use of his Skinner box. He would give caged animals treats after they performed a specific action as an example of positive reinforcement. For negative reinforcement, he would administer shocks if they didn't perform the intended tasks (McLeod). These behavior modification techniques can be applied to humans as well. When we log in to our social media apps and find that someone liked our post, that is a positive reinforcement and it will likely motivate us to post more content. On the other hand, if we are being bullied or ridiculed online we might also engage more to try and defend ourselves. Negative emotions are even more powerful than rewards. So, either way, social media companies are getting what they want, which is more engagement (Orlowski).

Adolescents are being “trained” to be on social media and most don't even realize it. This kind of power is dangerous for social media companies to have. When it comes to societal issues like politics, they can have a huge impact. They have what is known as news feed algorithms that looks for information people are most likely to interact with. These news stories are skewed

toward engagement rather than truth. They don't care if a story is true or not, if it gets someone to click on it and engage with the platform more, then its all good in their books. This can also have negative effects on adolescents because social media is where most of them get their news. This is where they are getting most of the information they use to form their opinions of important things like who to vote for. They're social media feeds are like echo chambers that surround them with things they already know and agree with. This prevents them from getting the full picture on any given situation to form an adequate opinion about it. Everyone's feeds look different and are tailored specifically for each individual. This is contributing to the lack of empathy that adolescents are capable of feeling. They literally can't see where the other person is coming from.

Dr. Jordan Peterson suggests that when we see the world in this narrow way, it makes us easier to control and easier to manipulate (Taylor). This is why social media can be so dangerous. According to Jaron Lanier, facebook workers have come out to say that they were instructed to suppress conservative leaning news stories in it's trending section. Social media platforms are controlling what stories we see and which ones we don't. If our adolescents are not made aware of these tactics, they may fall victim to unconscious manipulation. Who is to say that social media companies are not getting hefty checks from political campaigns to push their information on these platforms. This is not the first time people that were part of the creation of these platforms speak out against them. This should be eye opening and concerning (Lanier).

There are plenty of dangers adolescents are warned of when growing up in this cruel world. One of those dangers is social media. In the same way we want to equip them with the knowledge necessary to be functioning adults in society, they should also be taught about safely navigating the internet and social media. This can be done by making them aware of possible

manipulation tactics that can be used against them and that everything they see and hear isn't always the truth or at least not the full picture. They should exercise critical thinking skills and question everything. This is the best way to keep our young generation safe and help them maintain their autonomy. This is not an attempt at disconnecting from social media platforms entirely, but it's beneficial to know that we should not take information from there at face-value. Adolescents should be encouraged to read laterally, meaning to look at different sources for the same information and not just rely on one. Also, they should try and diversify their social media feeds by following accounts they may not necessarily agree with just to have that exposure to different viewpoints.

We need to make sure our adolescents are well equipped to deal with things they may encounter on social media platforms because we can't rely on social media companies to make it safer on their end. Although social media companies have tried to improve their algorithms to be less biased, "no algorithm is perfect, or objective" (John). It takes several parties to make social media safer. This includes schools, parents, advertising companies, government, and social media companies themselves (Glazzard). The best line of defense is to equip the person using it.

The biased algorithms of social media platforms have affected adolescent brains and has made them more susceptible to manipulation. As well as making it difficult for them to form their own individual identities and informed opinions. We need to prepare adolescents to combat these tactics and remain autonomous while surfing through social media, preventing them from becoming lab rats that are only making these companies richer. The companies behind these platforms are not people we can trust to make this situation better, it starts with us. If we really want to prepare our adolescents for this cruel world we need to foster joy, intellectual challenge,

individuality, curiosity, among other good qualities. This will create better equipped and educated adults that are capable of making necessary changes in society for the better.

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