Social Media's Effect on Youth
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Abstract

Social media influencers often have a dedicated following, which tends to contain a large number of adolescents [1]. These influencers state opinions that may not have a factual basis, which are then absorbed by their followers and relayed within their social circles. This effectively creates an echo chamber, where everyone involved buys into these beliefs. Some of these beliefs are extremely harmful to the general public. As more adolescents join social media, more may have constant access to harmful ideologies, such as misogyny and racism, which leads to a less progressive world. In this review, the inner workings and significance of this mechanism will be discussed.

Keywords: prejudice, conformity, and adolescents

Social media is currently one of the most important factors in the social lives of adolescents [1]. Through social media, teenagers access varied communication methods, entertainment, and information. During lockdowns and quarantine due to the COVID-19 pandemic, high schoolers resorted to social media to contact friends and classmates. Before lockdown, social media was already extremely popular with the younger generation, but after lockdown, it played an even bigger role in the social lives of teenagers [2]. Aside from one's social circle, social media can also allow for an easier way to spread information. For example, many schools have social media accounts that are used to post information regarding events and opportunities, as do many news outlets, thus allowing for users to access a variety of information from various sources all on one platform. Ultimately, the engagement on social media among adolescents continues to be an influential component of their experiences which contributes to how they interact with society.

With this in mind, social media platforms ideally should provide users with several opinions from multiple sources to allow for a full understanding of a major event or incident. Yet, this is not the case [3]. Many people prefer interacting with posts that involve topics they like, which is why social media platforms usually have an algorithm. These algorithms allow users to see posts that reflect things that they already like and engage with [4]. For example, if a person likes and comments under a post that talks about loving women who adhere to traditional gender roles, they are more likely to see similar posts.

As such, the idea that social media is rampant with fat-shaming, misogyny, transphobia, homophobia, and racism [5] is supported. Opinions that people have regarding the above mentioned systemic discriminations result in the development of in-group solidarity and practices [6] – such as beliefs that the ideal body type is being "skinny," "slim," or "petite," which tends to lead to fatphobic beliefs that expand off of those initial opinions. Therefore, those who do not approve of or promote such beliefs as ideal would then be classified as "other," or the out-group. The attack of this out-group is what prejudice is, and social media is a breeding ground for this prejudice [7].

Social media influencers aid this process of developing prejudice. They are able to introduce their ideals to their audiences, as seen in the way they are able to convince followers to buy certain sponsored products. Seeing a person that they idolize subliminally, or even overtly, sharing their opinions leads to viewers believing something that they may otherwise not [8].

SOCIAL INFLUENCE THEORY AND ITS ROLE IN ONLINE PREJUDICE

Social influence theory, as proposed by Herbert Kelman [9], states that people are greatly influenced by the ideas of others. This theory is clearly seen in adolescents, which is why peer pressure is considered to be such a big issue for the age group [10]. People have various influential groups in their lives that affect their decisions and opinions, regardless of whether or not they choose to surround themselves with these people. A person's perception of the social norm may affect their own opinions regarding certain matters. In multiple studies done by Crandall et al. [6], the effects of these perceived social norms were analyzed. The authors analyzed the "mean prejudice acceptability score" for certain prejudice targets, as well as the

acceptability of discrimination and prejudice-based humor. When taken side-by-side, these studies can highlight how the social norm affects prejudice. Generally, the studies showed that "mean prejudice acceptability score," acceptability of discrimination, and prejudice-based humor had strong positive correlation with each other, meaning that when people deem it acceptable to harass someone, discrimination against that group is also seen as more acceptable.

This logic can apply in various ways, including over the Internet. The Internet is a place where people are able to interact with others on the other side of the world. Social media provides a space that allows for communication of various ideas, including opinions/social norms. Therefore, if people see an influx in posts targeting a certain group of people, they may deem it acceptable to be prejudiced towards them as well, as they view this prejudice as "normal." As social media users are able to post almost anything online, social media sites are easy avenues for sharing prejudiced beliefs with the rest of the world [7], and social influence theory begets the absorption of these very beliefs.

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS AND THEIR ROLE IN ONLINE PREJUDICE

Social media influencers, while not quite as influential as traditional celebrities, are starting to rise in fame. Despite this slight difference, both types of stars are able to persuade their fans in a variety of ways, including the various advertisements and sponsorships they obtain. In fact, celebrities can even influence their fans to make certain health decisions by simply giving medical advice [11]. This is a large amount of power to have over fans, which can have both positive and negative effects. Certain influencers may potentially use this power to convince their fans that their opinions and beliefs are the right ones. This use of power can lead to fans absorbing and supporting these opinions and beliefs with no other reason than the fact that their favorite social media influencer shared them. In summary, influencers tend to be idolized, which makes all of their actions and thoughts seem perfect to their followers.

ALGORITHMS AND THEIR ROLE IN ONLINE PREJUDICE

Social media algorithms are applications that take a user's personalized information and find relevant posts for them [4]. Therefore, if a person likes a post discussing astrology, for example, they may find similar astrology-related posts on their feed. This application, while intended to make users spend more time on the sites and increase engagement with posts, tends to have a key drawback that comes with it: the creation of an echo chamber. Increased engagement with posts discussing political or social issues, such as sexism, may lead to a user only viewing posts on one side of the debate. This echo chamber intensifies these opinions, much like group polarization [12].

Such algorithms also provide room for fake news to be spread, which may further exacerbate prejudice [13]. On top of this, if a user interacts with one of these fake news posts, they will be exposed to more similar posts based on algorithms, potentially leading to the user experiencing the illusory truth effect. The illusory truth effect, a term coined by Hasher et al. [14], refers to the tendency to believe false information after having it been repeated to them multiple times. Being misinformed is rather dangerous (in various ways, one example being during the COVID-19 pandemic), especially when the person has access to social media, as they can

spread that misinformation, and suddenly more and more people believe something that is not true. Once again, this false information can increase prejudice, as it can introduce ideas without providing significant and factual evidence.

OTHER USERS AND THEIR ROLE IN ONLINE PREJUDICE

The opinions of an adolescent's peers have the ability to greatly influence their own beliefs [15]. While it is true that people may limit their friend group to only those who share similar opinions to them, there is still a chance that those same friends could introduce certain beliefs to those very people [15]. People tend to believe that as adolescents grow older, they become more resistant to peer influences, but that does not mean that they are completely immune to them [15]. The addition of social media to the equation makes the peer influence more subtle, but still effective nonetheless, as users are (mostly) freely able to create and share posts as they wish, which allows for the spread of information, whether it be news or opinions.

The reason as to why this concept is relevant is the mere exposure effect, which is when repeated exposure to stimuli makes that same item more appealing to a person, as declared by Robert Zajonc [16]. This can be seen on social media platforms, as there, adolescents tend to follow their friends, and on these platforms, users see the posts that the people they are following share. Therefore, if a friend of Person A shares a post about how feminists are bad, Person A will likely find that post on their feed, which they may agree or disagree with. The more this friend shares posts, the more that Person A would see these posts, and the more likely they are to agree with the beliefs shared.

Unknown users (people on social media that one has no connection to or no knowledge of but can see comments and posts from) also play a role in the aggregation of prejudice. People do things for the sake of conformity, regardless of whether or not they personally know whose opinions they are conforming to, and it is no different online. Nagar and Gill [13] decided to study this topic, focusing on how social conformity can affect Islamophobia in Indians. The researchers used a fake news article that had Islamophobic undertones, and formed two groups: one that saw the fake article with comments bashing Muslims, and another that saw the fake article with articles supporting Muslims and attacking the original post. The results suggested that the group who viewed the comments that supported Muslims and bashed the original creator of the post had a lower Islamophobic attitude in comparison to the other group. In summary, this demonstrates how people are influenced by what information they are exposed to. Their opinion depended on simply seeing multiple people (with whom they had no connection) with the same opinion on a couple of posts.

CONCLUSION

There are many persuasive factors adolescents are exposed to that allow for the easy spread of prejudice. This prejudice can severely distort their worldview. Social media influencers in particular are able to use their role in the lives of their followers to subtly suggest their opinions, which are easily assimilated, generally with the desire of being like their idols. This absorption of values can have disastrous effects on everyone, as it can alter the way these adolescents may view their peers or even themselves.

Ultimately, this osmosis of prejudice is becoming a problem that must be addressed. With the increase in support of certain biased social media influencers, it is becoming overwhelmingly common to find a number of adolescents who are actively endorsing and sharing the same harmful beliefs as their favorite social media influencers [17]. Prejudiced ideals are harmful to everyone, and avoiding the absorption of beliefs is necessary for society to continue working towards being as accepting of its participants as possible.

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