



Toxic Influencers on Social Media: Impact on Children and Adolescents. A Brief Review

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ABSTRACT

As the advancement of technology increases, the use of social media by children and teenagers is becoming more and more common. These young age groups tend to spend their time interacting with online friends and seem to follow famous people, influenced by the content on their screens. Influencers are people who have become widely known through the promotion of themselves and their lifestyle on social media. They often work with commercial companies aiming to influence users to consume the products they promote. The negative effects of toxic influencers on children and adolescents are widespread and widely accepted. This brief review demonstrates high rates of addictive and risky behaviors, over-consumption patterns, eating disorders and negative body image in children and adolescents due to the negative influence of content promoted by toxic influencers on social media. In these circumstances, both scientists working with the young population and parents should act as a shield against the risk of disruption to children's physical and mental health.

Key Words: toxic influencers, adolescents, children, social media, review

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Introduction

Social media is nowadays used by billions of users around the world, making it highly attractive. Therefore, through social media new leadership figures, influencers, are emerging. Influencers are people whose careers depend heavily on social media.¹ For most of them, being involved on the internet is not only a profession but also a way of life. They are recognized by many as opinion leaders as they shape public attitudes and persuade their followers.² They are powerful individuals who have a remarkable number of followers who follow their posts on a regular basis.

Influencers use social media almost daily to gain fame, glory, and money.³ As experts in modern marketing, they approach topics related to health, fashion, beauty, sports, or other social issues.

Influencers are divided into categories based on the social media through which they address their audience. Therefore, an influencer who posts content on a blog is then considered a blogger.⁴ If he creates videos on YouTube, then he belongs to the category of youtubers.⁵ If he creates content on Instagram, he is considered an instagrammer.⁵ Finally, if he conducts challenges on TikTok, then he is a TikToker.⁵

The influencer in question enhances his appeal to the world if he shows his personal life, has experience in using social media, fame, attractive physical appearance and unique yet extravagant content to post.⁴

However, in order to be able to receive the status of an influencer, one must first and foremost spark the interest of his audience, have a significant number of followers as well as likes and comments on his posts. Finally, it is essential that he or she leads a significant number of people to make decisions based on his or her recommendations or to change their consumption habits because he or she has suggested it to them.⁶

The dynamic presence of influencers online has increased in recent years with children and adolescents being the main contributors. Despite the opportunities for children and adolescents to easily access data and information provided by influencers, their influence has often been considered toxic (toxic influencers). Consequently, issues of depression, anxiety and other emotional disorders, distorted body image, adoption of unhealthy or even addictive behaviors and risky actions have been reported. Toxic influencers therefore play a leading role in the negative impact on the physical and mental health of children and adolescents.

Method

This brief review was performed under the recommended reference framework and the PRISMA guidelines. It was conducted in the following databases: Pubmed, Google Scholar, SCOPUS, JSTOR and PsycInfo, up to 14 April, 2023. The algorithm used for the research is the following: (Teenagers OR teenager OR adolescents OR adolescent OR adolescence OR youth OR young people OR young person OR youngster OR teens OR teen OR puberty OR pubescent OR youth OR minors OR minor OR children OR child OR kid OR kids) AND (Toxic influencer OR toxic influencers OR bad influencer OR bad influencers OR negative influencer OR negative influencers OR greek influencer OR greek influencers OR toxic instagrammers OR toxic instagrammer OR bad instagrammer OR bad instagrammers OR negative instagrammer OR negative instagrammers OR toxic blogger OR toxic bloggers OR bad blogger OR bad bloggers OR negative blogger OR negative bloggers OR toxic youtuber OR toxic youtubers OR bad youtuber OR bad youtubers OR negative youtuber OR negative youtubers OR toxic Tiktoker OR toxic Tiktokers OR bad Tiktoker OR bad Tiktokers OR negative Tiktoker OR negative Tiktokers) AND (Negative effect OR negative effects OR negative impact OR negative impacts OR bad effect OR bad effects OR bad impact OR bad impacts OR toxic effect OR toxic effects OR toxic impact OR toxic impacts). The review focused on the effects of toxic influencers on children and adolescents aged 4-18 years. There was flexibility in the eligibility of research studies. The review included empirical studies, case studies or reviews.

Addictive behaviors/Smoking

According to the prevailing view, exposure to more social media posts with e-cigarette content results in more positive attitudes towards e-cigarettes among children and adolescents. As a typical example, adolescents in 2019 from California and Canada who made heavy use of social media were more willing to consume e-cigarettes as they did not understand the risks of smoking.⁷ Indeed, it has been accepted that the influence of e-cigarette content did not depend on whether the content appeared to come from a peer or adult influencer or an advertising company.⁷ At the same time, e-cigarette use among US teens increased in 2020. For example, in a survey of 1047 US teenagers, 55% were playing tricks with cigarette vapour while watching TikTok videos and 21% were using flavoured e-cigarettes.⁸ Case in point, the lungs of 16 year old Ewan Fisher where after 6 months of playing tricks with cigarette smoke he resembled the lungs of an 80 year old lifelong smoker.

Risky tobacco use behaviors were therefore associated with e-cigarette flavors and tobacco tricks.⁸ More specifically, in 2020 Asian influencers were dominant, followed by Americans and Europeans as they had 3 times more engaging content.⁹ In fact, Asian and American influencers had 6 times more followers under the age of 18 compared to Europeans.⁹

Addictive behaviors/Alcohol

Minors are also exposed to a large number of alcohol posts by influencers on a regular basis. More specifically, a survey in the Netherlands in 2019 showed that 63.5% of influencers (n=178) recently made alcohol-related posts, which were perceived by minors in a positive way as they depicted people laughing or drinking with others.¹⁰ In fact, 75 of the 384 alcohol posts showed pure brand alcohol which suggests that the alcohol industry has found a way to circumvent the law and reach minors.¹⁰ Incidentally, when influencers disclosed that they were advertising an alcohol brand they had fewer likes and comments than when they did not make such a disclosure.¹⁰ Additionally, 8 out of 25 posts did not have the slogan “no alcohol under 18” as recommended.¹⁰ In addition, adolescents preferred to emulate lifestyle influencers more in the context of alcohol consumption. Typical examples of the strong influence influencers have in the context of alcohol consumption include a TikTok challenge that trended for teens and garnered over 800+ million views where you had to pose for a virtual photo shoot with a beer brand and Jason Derulo, who is the 15th most followed person on TikTok and posted 9 videos promoting Bedlam Vodka with a total of 88700000 views, 10228000 likes, 64251 comments and 42109 shares.¹¹

Overconsumption tendencies

In general, in childhood and adolescence there is a strong difficulty in recognizing hidden advertising in social media, while at the same time, consumption habits develop in these ages. These consumption habits, especially of preschool children, are influenced by influencers of the same age or slightly older than them.¹² By way of example, we could mention that teenagers in Romania demonstrate that even when Instagram ads are in the native language, this recognition of the ads does not lead to a critical evaluation of their purchases.¹³ Meanwhile, 81% of American parents let their children under 11 years old watch YouTube and are exposed to thousands of ads be

fore the video.¹²

Of particular interest was a related survey conducted among Greek 18 years old on purchasing attitudes. These teens (n=920) followed influencers related to fashion, beauty, food, and entertainment and were heavily influenced in their buying habits. Initially, 60% used Instagram quite a bit to a lot while 68.6% followed influencers on Instagram that promoted products.¹⁴ Indeed, this research confirms the influence of influencers on the consumption habits of Greek 18 years old since 47.93% preferred to buy from Instagram.¹⁴ As an illustrative example, there is also a children’s YouTube channel, Ryan’s World, aimed at children aged 2-6 years old, where a young boy promotes products and toys, shaping the preferences of thousands of children.¹²

Risky Behavior

To gain attention, influencers mostly share dangerous selfies (mostly altitude-related) to gain attention, but they have claimed 137 lives around the world between March 2014 and December 2016.¹⁵ In fact, India is the country with the most fatalities from selfies.¹⁵ Most of the selfie-takers are aged between 15-18 years and hence, they are individuals who take dangerous selfies and post them on social media influencing their followers to take similar ones.¹⁶ Also, apart from dangerous selfies, it is crucial to note risky challenges that have become widely known on social media. To begin with, the KIKI CHALLENGE involves people dancing to the lyrics of the song “Kiki, Do you love me?” and filming themselves while a car drives down the street.¹⁷ There have been reported cases of car accidents, injuries, accidents, crashes and even deaths of young people. Case in point, Will Smith performing the Kiki challenge dance encouraging his 77 million followers to do the same.¹⁷ Also, Shane Dawson is a popular YouTuber with more than 20 million subscribers where he publicized the BLUE WHALE CHALLENGE.¹⁸ In 2015 two teenage girls from Russia (Angelina Davydova and Diana Kuznetsova) after watching well-known influencers publicizing the challenge, participated in it, which cost them their lives as they fell from high floors of apartment buildings in order to complete it successfully.¹⁸ Furthermore, Slender Man’s story began to spread in videos of well-known influencers, such as Willytube, which thousands of children watched.¹⁸ Thus, on 31 May 2014, two 12-year-old girls in the US (Anissa Weier and Morgan Geyser) tricked their friend in the woods and stabbed her nineteen times to show their devotion to this

creature.¹⁸ Finally, in July 2018, YouTuber ReignBot, made a video explaining the Momo Challenge aimed at children as young as 8 years old.¹⁸ It's about a creature that sends messages and commands and asks children to perform violent acts such as cutting themselves, harming others, and taking their own lives. The first recorded victim was a 12-year-old girl in July 2018 who was found hanged in the backyard of her family's home near Buenos Aires.

Eating disorders/Body image

The effects of toxic influencer on children and adolescents have also been strong in terms of eating habits and behaviors. Recent research is indicative of the toxic influence on the intake of unhealthy foods in children and adolescents.¹⁹ Many studies have emphasized the influence of TikTok trends, where famous influencers promote themselves by challenging children and young adolescents to participate in high food intake challenges or rigorous exercise in order to lose weight. The results predict risk of obesity, unhealthy food intake or excessively low food consumption with concern for anorexia.²⁰⁻²¹ In particular, a 32.6% risk of obesity and a 6.7% risk of bulimia in children and adolescents (mean age 16.4 years) participating in the Nutella Challenge was found (n=373).²² This trend was widely promoted by popular social media influencers and aimed to consume a jar of Nutella chocolate in just two minutes. Negative effects on food intake have been accepted to have a strong impact on the body image perception. Children and adolescents show a tendency to compare themselves to the photographs and videos of toxic influencers in social media and form a negative perception of their body image.²³ In fact, many adolescents experience anxiety, low self-esteem and depressive symptoms as a result of negative body image.²⁴

Conclusion

Toxic influencers have a strong negative effect on children and adolescents, affecting their daily life and actions. Children and adolescents often engage in addictive (e.g. smoking, alcohol) or risky behaviors, over-consumption habits, exhibit abnormalities in diet and food intake, and at the same time seem to constantly compare themselves to the influencers by constructing a negative body image. Because of these significant effects on physical and mental wellbeing, scientists working with the child and adolescent population are called upon to build a shield against the toxic content. At the same time, parental mediation plays a significant role since parents are the gatekeepers of children and adolescents' negative exposure to online persuasive messages.

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