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Social media and influencers in the lives of teenagers

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Abstract

The article aims to look at the growing role of social media, with particular emphasis on the part of influencers in the lives of adolescents.

The article is a review based on the empirical research available on this topic. Contact with influencers meets not only the relational, informational, or entertainment needs of young people but also the need to compare ourselves with other people present in our lives. On the other hand, it can maintain the fear of FOMO, which in the long run results in a reduction in the adolescent's social well-being. The article invokes the theory of social comparisons and discusses the supporting role of parents in the context of Berne's structural analysis of social media use by adolescents. The transactional analysis also considered the specifics of influencers' contact with their recipients.

Keywords: social media, influencer, adolescent, social comparison theory, transactional analysis.

Introduction

The use of mobile devices by children and adolescents has increased rapidly in recent years (Rideout, Sphir, Pai, and Rudd, 2013; Anderson and Jiang, 2018). Research shows that young people spend more time online (using smartphones and tablets) – especially on social networks than watching TV (Ofcom, 2016; Smit et al., 2019). Unlike TV, the content available on social media (such as Instagram, Snapchat, or TikTok) is available anytime, anywhere. Social media algorithms automatically select recommendations that are similar to the content currently being viewed and display them to the user. It all adds up to a steady stream of incoming content that can create a compulsion to watch and cause a need to keep returning to social media – checking if I missed anything. The so-called FOMO (*fear of missing out* – the fear that in our absence on the Internet, others experience satisfactory experiences without us) is an increasingly common phenomenon today (Przybylski et al., 2013). Research shows that young adolescents (10–14 years old) are particularly susceptible to them – much more than older adolescents (over 14 years old) or adults (Van Deursen et al., 2015).

According to some authors, the long hours that young people spend online translate into problematic Internet use for them, sometimes even defined as addiction (Lopez-Fernandez, 2017; Lin et al., 2014). Although the concept of addiction to new technologies is not included in the DSM-5 as a disease entity, the APA recommends extreme caution while encouraging scientists to undertake research related to problematic Internet use (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016).

Along with the growing role of new technologies in the lives of young people, social media (also known as Social Media Networking Sites – SNS) enable their users to use content provided by other content and actively contribute to it. By social media, I mean all kinds of web applications where you can share information and communicate with others. Social media has brought its young recipients a significant change in identity formation. They enable individual construction of a digital image and allow them to connect with friends and meet new ones – by searching for them based on profiles presented on social media. Membership in social media creates a sense of community and often puts users in the active role of recipients. Jenkins described it as his kind of participatory culture, in which “members believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created)” (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. 6). It is safe to say that one of the requirements for participation in SMN is self-presentation. The most valued members present themselves, their lives, interests and views in front of others; they do it regularly, often, and in front of large audiences - influencers. By influencers, I mean people popular on social media who regularly publish content (e.g., image, video or text) for a broad audience. Such people are famous on the web and outside of it. They are recognized and appreciated by their “followers” (i.e., people who follow the influencer, regularly visit his website, and are active on his profile: comment on posts, like, and send private messages). Influencers “have a strong impact on their follower’s decision-making” (Hudders, de Jans, de Veirman, 2021, p. 3).

Social media influencers and their impact on youth

Although social media undoubtedly affects the lives of young people, teenagers themselves are not able to answer how it happens. 45% believe that social media has neither a positive nor negative impact on their lives. 31% say the effect is positive, and 24% say it is negative. They consider the role of social media to be the most significant positive in maintaining contacts and interaction with others: communicating with peers and family and establishing new and maintaining old connections and acquaintances (Anderson, Jiang, 2018). But social media is also a place for them to entertain, express themselves and receive social support (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

Fashion, beauty, and sports guides – these and many other topics discussed in social media make some of their authors. The so-called influencers become significant people in teenagers' lives (Martinez and Olsson, 2019; Smit et al., 2019). They can be described as people with a high impact and trust in the community they create on social media, for which their reach and influence are also significant (Carter, 2016; Agostino, Arnaboldi, and Calissano, 2019).

Every day, influencers systematically provide details of their lives, often intimate ones, thanks to building relationships with their followers. This relationship deepens as the frequency of published material increases. The video films, the so-called rolls or reports, recorded by influencers – audiovisuals seem to create strong connections between the sender and the recipient. Face-to-face contact – even via a digital device – breaks the distance and makes the impression of greater closeness and directness. Audiovisual is currently one of the features that social media creators strive for: traditional word posts or photos are being abandoned in favor of a direct account recorded by the creator. The TikTok application is the leader in this trend – entirely based on short videos and other social media trying to keep up with it by including the so-called video rolls (Instagram) or video reports (Facebook). Each TikTok user can create video recordings and add background music, filters, and effects. This option allows you to express yourself, be creative, share your creativity with others, make self-presentations, and communicate with your audience. Thanks to these possibilities, websites such as TikTok become a place where communities are created and operated, concentrated around certain people, thematic groups, trends, and topics. Thanks to social media and influencers, teenagers satisfy various needs: information and entertainment (Jerslev, 2016) and social/relational (Garcia-Rapp, 2017).

Virtual communities created on social networks allow for building relationships of varying degrees of durability and personal relationships. The interactions that occur there lead to the creation of social networks (Castells, 2008). Batorski (2008) wrote about social networks as follows: "a network is any set of objects connected with certain relationships. […] It is most often a collection of people connected by socially significant relationships" (p. 168). And one of the relationships established in social media is the influencer- followers relationship.

As a rule, young people choose people of similar age as their idols, thanks to which the content provided by influencers matches the teenagers' frame of reference (similar values, experiences, preferences) (Maropo et al., 2020; Anderson and Jiang, 2018).

The specificity of contacting influencers with recipients and recipients with influencers seems to fit perfectly with the theory of transactional analysis, especially one of its most recognizable parts, which is structural analysis. Eric Berne assumed that the human personality is divided into three states of the *self* – each carries specific behavior patterns. The first state – Me-Parent – is the normative state. The second state – Adult Me, is the state responsible for rational and consistent contact with reality. The third state – I-Child, is an emotional state equivalent to children's emotions and experiences (Berne, 2004). In various social situations, our messages and behaviors come from the three ego states indicated by Berne.

Although social media gathers a variety of creators, you can observe that not all of them show the same activity and need to "exist" in the network. People who care about publicity, keeping a large group of recipients around them, establishing lucrative advertising contracts, and recognition are the most active.

Profiles popular among young people (music stars, sports stars, YouTubers, Instagrammers, tiktokers) show that even being of a similar age to their recipients, influencers assume the role of *Parent-Me, entering into parent-child* parallel transactions with recipients. Fans contact them in private messages, seek advice, and confide in problems. And the *Parent-Critical* influencers advise, explain, and provide guidance, even if their life experience is not much more extensive than the person asking them the question (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). On influencers' accounts, you can also find moralizing content, which displays mentoring behavior towards recipients.

As a rule, influencers consistently create their image and try to show the "authentic" version of themselves. Authenticity is important because it allows recipients to identify themselves with the content that influencers present on their profiles. Influencers understand that only in this way will they create a strong community with their fans. Despite this, the content they convey to the recipients most often places the influencer in the position of a person who knows more, better, differently (Anderson and Jiang, 2018). And just like the *Caring Parent*, the influencer also cares about the recipients, gives advice, and helps achieve goals – like a parent who cares about his child's development.

In adolescents' use of the content provided by influencers, there is still too little research showing the importance of supporting communication with the immediate environment (including parents). Undoubtedly, influencers have a significant influence on the formation of young people’s opinions on a given topic. Social media influencers „have built a sizeable social network of people following them” (de Veirman et al., 2017, p. 798) and „shape their audience’s attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media” (Freberg et al., 2011, p. 90). Qualitative research confirms that they influence the behavior of young people: what they wear, eat, and the gadgets they use (Anderson and Jiang, 2018).

Influencers seem to act as opinion leaders and are seen as experts on a specific topic. Their opinions are significant to many people (Lin, Bruning, and Swarna, 2018).

Influencers often have profiles on social media specialized in a specific category, focusing on a niche topic or type, e.g., fashion, food, health, fitness, entertainment, etc. Sponsored entries appear on their profiles – the most popular ones make their living by advertising products, unique advertising entries (so-called advertorials) reaching a given recipient group. Campbell and Farrell (2020) stand out even bake categories of influencers, dividing them into a celebrity, mega, macro, micro, and nanoinfluencers. The indicator of belonging to a given type is the number of followers (megainfluencers have the most followers, nanoinfluencers have the least), which is an indicator of the impact range.

Influencers provide their recipients with a satisfying experience by sharing their personal life, intimate affairs, and thoughts (Berryman and Kavka, 2018), showing their hobbies, family, friends, preferences, and daily activities – they update information (often many times) every day. Many are active not only on one platform but on many, publishing their content simultaneously (e.g., they post their content from TikTok on Instagram). All this makes young people feel attached to their idols and identifies with them and the community they create around them. Unable to check messages from their favorite social media accounts, they feel anxious. They try to avoid such situations by being constantly online to minimize them.

Social media and the role of supporting communication between parents and adolescents

Promoters of media education point out that parents or guardians of children and adolescents have an essential role in preventing the excessive use of social media. Indeed, in many homes, the time young teens spend on social media is regulated by their parents (Hefner et al., 2019; Khurana et al., 2015). The younger the child, the more significant the role of parents in managing their contact with technologies (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Bae, 2015). But supportive communication with parents in the context of general media use is also crucial during adolescence (Elsaesser et al., 2017; Appel et al., 2014; Bloemen and Coninck, 2020).

Research has shown that restrictive parental mediation regarding children's use of new technologies can protect them from excessive internet use and digital experiences (Kalmus, Blinka, & Ólafsson, 2015). In such families, according to research, a reduction in the number of time children spend with the media can also be observed (Chang et al., 2015; Chng et al., 2015). Conversely, the excessive use of smartphones by adult guardians of a child is correlated with the same excessive use of smartphones by their children (Terras and Ramsay, 2015). Factors protecting against excessive use of smartphones include good relations with peers (Bae, 2015) and support networks (Ihm, 2018).

Managing a teenager's contact with social media, without a doubt, requires much attention from parents. The parent's entry into the *Critical Parent State* often creates a tendency to control behaviors and phenomena, especially those little known to him. Safe is what has always been known, what is predictable, and what has already been proven. So, using various methods, the *Critical Parent* will try to extinguish new and alien behaviors to him – and available to the young man on social media. For such a *Critical Parent*, the use of social media is something that should be kept under control. Often *a Critical Parent* perceives social media from his – full of stereotypes – perspective.

This perspective is not an isolated approach: empirical research on media use by the youngest is, in many cases, presented from the perspective of a researcher who is, after all, an adult - children and adolescents are rarely given the floor in research. Thus, the perception of the use of social media by children and adolescents is full of generalizations, which the *Critical Parent* is willing to refer to by introducing restrictions. However, while the *Critical Parent* can control the child and their use of social media, this control should be reduced at some stage of the child's development in favor of the *Adult Ego State*. This balance between social norms and emotions requires trusting the child/adolescent and believing that the child can also enter the *Adult Ego state,* thanks to the digital competence sufficient to deal with potentially dangerous online situations. The parent must accept that the child's autonomy increases as the child grows and matures. Media influencers will gain importance, and the parent's position as an authority will weaken. Over time, digital competencies developed by a child will predispose them to choose valuable content in social media and be guided by values commonly considered positive.

Researchers distinguished specific styles of parental mediation related to media use by children and adolescents (Livingstone and Helsper, 2008). And so: 1) Active parental mediation is linked to parent-child discussions about media use. 2) Restrictive parental mediation refers to the set of rules by the parents that a child must respect (e.g., restrictions on media use). 3) Sharing is the shared use of media by children and parents similarly (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). According to Hefner and the team (2019), restrictive mediation is the least effective. It may result in problematic media use by the child later, without solid restrictions. Scientists agree that media education and supporting communication between parents and children play an essential role, beneficial for the development of children and adolescents (Walter, 2018; Bloemen and de Coning, 2020). Such supportive parent-child communication also reduces the experience of FOMO among adolescents (Alt and Boniel-Nissim, 2018). Existing studies also confirm the hypothesis of the positive role of caching social support (Appel et al., 2014). According to it, appropriate consent from parents (e.g., in the form of a conversation) is a specific buffer between a stressful event and its negative effect (Cohen and Wills, 1985). For a teenager, such a stressful event may be the lack of a message on the profile of the watched person, a favorite person (no status update by the influencer), or the inability to see the new content posted by the influencer. When the need for immediate gratification (in the form of a new post, video, or photo) is unmet, the teen may perceive the situation as a stressful event. Parental involvement in the *Adult Self* role can help alleviate this experience. Treating the child as a conversation partner will allow the child to redefine the problem and understand how to deal with the need for immediate gratification. It will open the way to dialogue and signal that the parent can also be a communication partner on topics related to social networking sites.

It is worth noting that although there are studies on the supportive role of parents in the use of digital media (Appel et al., 2014; Boniel-Nissim et al., 2015), however, in the area of influencers' influence on adolescents, the role of parents has not yet been established, well researched. We can only guess that adolescents who evaluate communication with their parents as supportive will cope better with the negative impact of influencer content on their lives and the FOMO phenomenon.

Influencers and the social well-being of adolescents

The most popular social networking platform in the world today is TikTok. In September 2021, this platform exceeded the number of one billion active users. And this number is growing successively. TikTok left Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube behind. Its users are increasingly younger recipients – including children who, according to the platform's policy, cannot open an account before 13. So we will not find any official data on how many users exactly this social medium has. Based on reports from private companies, we can only guess that this number is constantly growing (Open Mobi Report, 2021). According to data from the European Consumers Organization (BEUC), in France, 45% of children under the age of 13 declare that they use TikTok. In Great Britain, every second child aged 8–11 admits that they upload a film at least once a week. In the Czech Republic, the service is popular with 11- and 12-year-olds. In Norway, it is used by 1 in 3 children aged 10–11 (BEUC, 2021). It is a widespread practice to set up accounts under the required age – young users do it to make them feel belonging to a peer group. To create new friendships and maintain the existing ones, they increasingly have to follow popular brands and celebrities who are liked by the social group they belong to. To maintain their social status in a group, e.g., in a school class, they not only have to have an account on a given, popular social networking site but also like the same profiles as the rest of the group. It gives them access to the group you talk about during breaks after school (Iwanicka, 2020).

What makes TikTok so attractive? Its greatest strength is its algorithm, which quickly learns user preferences and suggests materials to watch, often regardless of who they are following and watching. So, even if someone is a beginner tiktoker and the content he publishes will “fall into the algorithm,” – he can reach a million views, regardless of the number of followers of his profile or the reach of other content. Different expectations and dreams than the parents’ generation According to the research by The Harris Poll commissioned by Lego, children (10–15 years old) today want to be more “Instagrammers” or “YouTubers” (about 30–40%) than representatives of such professions like a firefighter, teacher, secretary or astronaut (Harris Poll Report, 2019). The trend is clear: being a network star is a good way of life. And more and more teenagers earn money. Teenagers have contact with influencers early on and watch them at work much more often than a policeman, firefighter, or nurse. This profession is a desirable career path for them, much more natural – in their opinion than others.

Influencers are trendy in Poland among young people. Some of them, such as Lenka Pachuc from the channel “Hejka, tu Lenka”, “Vito i Bella” on YouTube, or “Pupcik-dupcik” have millions of young followers on TikTok or Instagram. However, they cannot compare with the world’s teenage influencers, who earn tens of millions a year on their online activities (record-holders) and have 30–40 million followers. The influencers „built a large social network of people who follow them” (de Veirman et al., 2017, p. 798). The attitudes of their recipients are shaped by constantly updated entries, photos, and videos. They express their views and thoughts daily, share opinions and ideas, and publish reviews, motivational content, and tutorials on various topics - from beauty to lifestyle, education, and socio-cultural and political events. They share this with an anonymous (primarily) audience, who can evaluate each post by writing a comment. They establish direct (at least apparently) contact with their audience, invite them into their world, and shorten the distance, often revealing private information about themselves. A distinction for the young recipient is the "like" of the idol obtained under the comment that the adolescent wrote, and the idol's observation of the account becomes a pass to gaining a better position in the peer group. Such distance breaking by influencers makes them seem trustworthy, close, "normal", and "familiar" (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). Addressing their audience directly, they are perceived by teenagers as similar to themselves in their films (Maropo et al., 2020). Such behavior increases their attractiveness and increases adolescents' involvement in content reception (Auter, 1992).

Teenagers are often a source of information on topics important to their generation (Martinez and Olsson, 2019; Marôpo et al., 2020; de Veirman et al., 2017). Although they do not personally engage in interpersonal relationships with each follower, the specificity of social media gives the impression of experiencing close parasocial relationships (Przybylski et al., 2013; Boerman, 2020).

However, research results confirm that intensive use of social media is negatively related to social well-being. Checking the applications of websites such as Instagram or TikTok too often translates directly into the amount of time young people spend with their peers or offline friends (Wegmann et al., 2017). You can also come across the thesis that teenagers are starting to prefer online communication – especially by following influencers on social media – choosing offline communication. This thesis does not seem to be supported by the research on younger children, who declare that offline meeting with friends is still more valuable for them than online activities (Iwanicka, 2020). However, the thesis that neglecting offline interpersonal relations may harm the social well-being of young people should be considered. But observing influencers can have two consequences: on the one hand, it stimulates the need for social contact by teenagers, the desire to find people with similar interests or values, and on the other hand – a reduced sense of belonging to a social group. Staying on social networks for a long time may also lead to disturbed self-esteem in a young person, lower self-esteem, and disturbed perception of one's body – by constantly comparing oneself not only with influencers but also with peers on the Internet.

The theory of social comparisons and influencers in social media

It is human nature to compare ourselves with others, regardless of age. All human behavior is formed from an early age through observing others and constant, though largely unconscious, comparison with others. As early as 1954, Leon Festinger explained that people strongly need to judge themselves. According to his theory of social comparisons, individuals define their social and personal values based on how they measure up to others (Dymkowski, 2007). According to this theory, comparing and opposing peers is part of shaping their identity. This process helps teens discover their views, preferences, attitudes, and behavioral motives.

There are social comparisons upwards and social comparisons downwards. The first type consists in relating oneself to people standing higher in the hierarchy, with higher social and material status, and with higher-rated abilities or qualities. It also refers to their popularity, to the features that we consider attractive and desirable in a given person. We often feel inferior to make such a comparison.

The second type is comparing ourselves with people who do worse than us, who have achieved less than us, are not widespread, fail, and make mistakes that have never happened to us (Paul et al., 2000). We focus on feeling better with our situation, resources, or skills.

Making both types of comparisons increases our well-being and self-esteem and improves self-esteem. We can combine two kinds of comparisons, referring to known and liked people while distancing ourselves from certain behaviors we disapprove of. Comparing ourselves with a known person improves our well-being (Makowski, 2009). We also distinguish a transverse comparison, which refers to comparing ourselves with someone we consider equal in various areas. Most often, we compare ourselves with our peers.

Social media can positively influence a young person's identity and develop them, and influencers can be role models. Upward comparisons, in this case, can inspire and create positive changes in our perception of ourselves: we focus on achieving similar effects to the person we observe (the impact of assimilation). However, they can also negatively magnify adolescent social comparisons' effects. Constantly watching the ideal image of your peers and celebrities on social media, and comparing yourself to them, can make a teenager feel of little worth, an insufficient person. Such comparisons are detrimental to your self-esteem, self-image, and well-being. Especially adolescents suffering from low self-esteem or depressive states will experience the negative effect of social comparisons more often than others (Lubomirski, Ross, 1997).

As many as 15% of the teenagers surveyed say that social media gives a distorted picture of other people's lives. In their opinion, this image negatively affects their well-being. 12% criticize them for the pressure generated by showing the ideal life of other teenagers or influencers (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

Additionally, constantly evaluating yourself, and comparing yourself with others, can create a specific, critical, competitive perspective. Frequent comparisons with others can make the young person experience jealousy, guilt, or regret more often (White et al., 2006).

For example, research shows that the content presented by influencers profoundly impacts teenagers' body image. As many as 80% of teenagers compared with celebrities known from the media, more than half of the respondents say that photos presented by influencers make them feel dissatisfied with their bodies (Common Sence Media Report, 2015). Teenagers tend to focus on traits such as attractiveness and popularity when they engage in social comparisons. They also compare their abilities and skills. Sometimes such comparisons can motivate teenagers to develop, to improve competencies in a given area. But they can also discourage you and make you anxious. It all depends on the teenager's self-esteem and the type of social comparisons made: up or down.

Spending a significant amount of time on social media, observing influencers and peers, they involuntarily make constant comparisons. As with other social comparisons, teens report lower self-esteem and self-esteem when engaging in comparisons on Instagram, Facebook, and other social media. This commitment includes, for example, viewing profiles where peers post information about their healthy habits, fun social events, or achievements. Teens felt better when they made downward comparisons – by looking at profiles of peers with fewer friends and fewer achievements (Vogel et al., 2014).

On the other hand, according to the authors of another study, "The results indicate that different types of online social comparisons have clear implications for the identity development of young people" (Yang et al., 2018). In other words, some social media comparisons are more favorable than others.

Researchers also separated "social ability comparison" from "social comparison of opinion." They then found that ability comparisons caused negative rumination and stress. However, comparisons of opinions were associated with an increase in well-being (Kocabiyik, 2021). Well-being is forming because teens feel empowered when expressing their views on social media. And this process, in turn, supports identity formation.

We should also remember the influence, as mentioned above, of parents on reducing unfavorable comparisons on social media. Parents' support and unconditional love ease the stress of adolescent social comparisons.

Conclusions

The presented narrative is an extension of the thesis that social media, especially influencers, play an essential role in the life of modern youth. Membership in social media creates a sense of community among young people and often places them in the active position of creators. The creators are the most valued members of the virtual community, and they gather the most prominent communities around them. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok allow you to communicate with your family or peers and enter into relationships with influencers. We notice that influencers increasingly influence young people's behavior and attitudes: how they dress, what they buy, and what their values are. For many young people, it is them who become authorities, essential people in life. Despite the declining role of parents in a young person's life, their careful presence is still significant. Home media education and child-support communication with parents can reduce their FOMO experience and be a shock absorber of stressful situations that a child encounters on social media. It can also minimize the effects of excessive social media use and negative self-perception and identity formation (social comparisons downwards). The most desirable influence of influencers on young people is that they will develop in various areas of life, increase self-esteem, raise self-esteem, and have a positive self-image (social comparisons up).

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Media społecznościowe i influencerzy w życiu nastolatków

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest analiza rosnącej roli mediów społecznościowych ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem wpływu influencerów na życie nastolatków. Artykuł stanowi przegląd oparty na dostępnych badaniach empirycznych w tej dziedzinie. Kontakt z influencerami zaspokaja nie tylko potrzeby relacyjne, informacyjne czy rozrywkowe młodych ludzi, ale także potrzebę porównywania się z innymi osobami obecnymi w ich życiu. Z drugiej strony, może on również podtrzymywać FOMO, co w dłuższej perspektywie prowadzi do obniżenia dobrostanu społecznego nastolatka. Artykuł odwołuje się do teorii porównań społecznych i omawia rolę rodziców w kontekście analizy strukturalnej Berne'a dotyczącej korzystania przez nastolatków z mediów społecznościowych. Analiza transakcyjna uwzględnia również szczegóły dotyczące kontaktu influencerów z ich odbiorcami.

Słowa kluczowe: media społecznościowe, influencer, adolescent, teoria porównań społecznych, analiza transakcyjna.