Recruitment of Social Media Influencers to Promote Self-Compassion Practices to Combat the Negative Effects of Social Media on Adolescents

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Gordon Rose's Psychology 300W course *Critical Analysis of Issues in Psychology*. The assignment asked students to take a stance on a topic of their choice that relates to one of the weekly course topics to create a thesis-based, argumentative term paper. The course emphasizes the necessity of critically assessing and interpreting information, therefore students were to use critical thinking and logical, fully formed arguments to support their thesis. The paper uses APA citation style.

Social media is a strong mode of influence over adolescents that commonly evokes feelings of being less than those they follow. Social media influencers who promote self-compassion practices create a buffering effect to the self-comparison and insecurity that is encouraged through social media for adolescents. Self-compassion works in opposition to the harmful effects of social media by encouraging acceptance of oneself instead of comparing oneself to idealized versions of others. Due to the high regard of influencers by adolescents, using their influence for practical application of self-compassion will combat the negative feelings often elicited by social media use. On a greater scope, implementation of self-compassion ambassadors on various social media platforms holds implications to help lower rates of youth mental illness, as self-compassion is empirically supported to be greatly beneficial for mental health.

A social media influencer, referred to from this point as an influencer, is a person who uses various social media platforms to gain followers and posts content to engage their audience (Gross & Wangenheim, 2018). Growth in followers is often accompanied by growth in influence they have over their audience and their ability to inspire and promote different ways of thinking, skills, and lifestyles (Gross & Wangenheim, 2018). Influencers are distinct from traditional celebrities (e.g., actors, artists, and reality television stars) because they gain celebrity status from posting on social media as opposed to becoming popular from affiliation with other celebrities or notable career achievements (Khamis et al., 2017). Influencers often begin as average people who commit to marketing themselves in accordance with their preferred niche, like makeup, fitness, or travel (Khamis et al., 2017). Through algorithmic recommendations to users in their feeds, a page of limitless suggested content, influencers gain attention and followers (Constant Contact, 2021; Slater et al., 2017). Though there is no designated number of followers or likes that an influencer requires to be determined as an influencer, higher amounts of these things, in addition to income through partnerships and brand deals, generally equate to greater success as an influencer (Khamis et al., 2017).

The current context of social media use is high among adolescents, categorized as those from aged 10-22 (Crone & Konjin, 2018). Phone ownership has become so commonplace that 98% of adolescents have a smartphone, half of which spend upwards of ten hours on it (Mediakix, 2018). Adolescence is a developmental period where parental influence declines and peer influence rapidly increases, making adolescents especially susceptible to the cycle of social acceptance perceived through the likes and follows of social media platforms (Crone & Konjin, 2018). These media-driven peer evaluations guide adolescents' self-concept and perception of others, as well as provide clear access to peer norms for interests and social media posts which can contribute to adolescent insecurity (Crone & Konjin, 2018).

In contrast to insecurity is self-compassion, a challenging habit for adolescents in particular as they navigate peer judgements and discovering themselves (Bluth & Blanton, 2014). Self-compassion consists of three points: kindness toward the self, appreciation for humanity in the sense that everyone has flaws and areas to improve upon, and mindfulness through acceptance of one's own feelings and experiences without ignorance or criticism (Neff & Germer, 2017). Adolescents typically view themselves as being alone in their problems in relation to their peers, directly contrasting the *common humanity* aspect of self-

compassion, they also endure high self-criticism through their identity searching. Self-compassion is supported to counteract the negative self-talk, stress and body shame among adolescents that are commonly associated with social media use (Bluth & Blanton, 2014; Bluth et al., 2016; Neff & Germer, 2017; Vanderbosch & Eggermont, 2016). Successful outcomes of integrating self-compassion into daily life bring forward a solution to the negative effects of social media usage in adolescence through the same form of mass communication in which harmful norms are spread. Promotion of self-compassion practices by social media influencers buffers the self-comparison and insecurity encouraged by social media for adolescents.

Social media poses negative effects on adolescents by enforcing the practices of self-comparison and feeling as though one is not good enough. Common feeds across media platforms tend to be filled with the socially approved ideal body type and glorify showing off flat stomachs and curvy hips (Slater et al., 2017). Social media portrays an unrealistic beauty standard as the norm, resulting in body comparison and insecurity (Vanderbosch & Eggermont, 2016). Additionally, social media is a place where users present their best self, showing off their aesthetically decorated homes and homemade meals which creates an unrealistic representation of daily living. Adolescents, specifically, are at a point in development where their judgement and emotional regulative brain structures remain underdeveloped, rendering them more sensitive to comparison of the self to highly edited pictures and experiences, as well as to negative peer appraisal (Crone & Konjin, 2018). Due to this sensitivity, adolescents are at heightened risk of the negative mental and emotional tolls of social media. Social media also teaches reliance on external approval as peers promote the value of likes and comments on social media posts, a crutch that will not satisfy a developing adolescent's need for acceptance as there are always peers with more likes and followers (Crone & Konjin, 2018). Therefore, adolescents are set up to be striving for an unattainable achievement of popularity that encourages a constant loop of envy. The negative impact of social media on adolescents is clear as they learn to respond to insecurity by longing after a socially constructed ideal. This highlights the need for a solution to guide adolescents through an increasingly social media-oriented world.

Adolescents look up to influencers and strive to be like them. A 2018 survey of internet-usage showed that 45% of teens were online almost always throughout the day, therefore they are constantly seeing enforcement of the lifestyles of popular influencers through their consistent online posts (Anderson

& Jiang, 2018). This creates a norm-enforcing effect because influencers have the social power to create trends that consume a user's feed (Hendriks et al., 2020). Through constant exposure to various social-media-enforced values and trends, users become accustomed to what they are consuming, believing (often falsely) that the content is most desirable or even normal. This can easily become a root cause of insecurity through believing one is worse-off than most others, more flawed, or excluded from the majority based of the illusion of social media.

The power of influencers as role models has been demonstrated by analyzing posts of alcohol and the effects they have on adolescents' perception of drinking. They show increasingly positive associations with drinking when exposed to these stimuli in a positive manner promoted by their favourite influencers (Hendriks et al., 2020). This is a prime example of how the kind of information adolescents are consistently exposed to, and who the information is coming from, have major effects on the shaping of their values and what they believe to be *cool*. The influential power of online role models is growing and is something that must be considered concerning the wellbeing of adolescents. Influencers are not only a rising new area of celebrity status but are surpassing actors and musicians in standing as YouTube users report a greater inclination to buy influencer-endorsed products over those actor-endorsed (O'Neil-Hart & Blumenstein, 2016).

A major part of influencers' appeal is the relatability and authenticity they exude, as much of their online content is presented from home (Hassan et al., 2021; Khamis et al., 2017; Lou & Kim, 2019). Relatability is appealing to an audience due to the perceived relational aspect of following an influencer compared to being a fan of a traditional celebrity, there is a more personal and intimate feeling to seeing a role model go about similar activities in their day (Hassan et al., 2021). This relatability creates more trust in the influencer, encouraging the follower to adopt their habits and recommendations. Utilizing this powerful mode of influence to promote healthy and prosocial ideas will be an effective method of widely reaching today's youth.

Self-compassion is a mental practice that buffers the negative influence of social media on adolescents. The accepting and understanding nature of self-compassion sharply contrasts with the observed harm social media poses on adolescents' self-image and security (Neff & Germer, 2017; Vanderbosch & Eggermont, 2016). Adolescents rated high in self-compassion exhibit less anxiety, stress, and negative mood, as well as report overall more positive emotion and contentment with their lives. These effects are similar to what is observed when

surrounded by supportive close friends because self-compassion works in a similar way to receiving compassion from others, resulting in an increased ability to act as one's own emotional support (Bluth et al., 2016). Therefore, responding to the self-comparison encouraged by social media with the kind acceptance of one's own areas for improvement and the appreciation that nobody is perfect takes power away from the practice of comparing oneself to peers and influencers online. There are suggested associations between self-compassion and lower preoccupation with self-evaluation and lowered concern with peer evaluation, even specifically with promotion through social media (Neff & Germer, 2017; Slater et al., 2017). Self-compassion is an integral factor in facilitating adolescents into states of improved mental health and self-perceptions.

Consistent engagement in self-compassion will increase if influencers are recruited to promote them. No matter how beneficial self-compassion may be, it is only useful in this context if it is utilized by adolescents. Sponsorships and ambassadorships are ways that brands advertise to an influencer's audience, in this case influencers would be recruited to be self-compassion ambassadors, sharing practical ways their followers can be self-compassionate just like them (Hendriks et al., 2020). For example, using Instagram posts to show flaws and vulnerability, accompanied by a caption that touches on a main principle of self-compassion, like common humanity, will encourage followers to be more comfortable acknowledging and being confident in their own perceived flaws. Followers tend to trust influencers' confidence and personability enough to buy the products or brands they advertise, leading to the idea that they would also trust the advertisement of prosocial behaviour such as self-compassion (Hassan et al., 2021). Analysis of beliefs that are implicitly enforced by social media and influencers reveals the impact that consistent viewing has on social media users, as well as the need for intentional positive messages to be spread on social media (Pilgram & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019).

Critics of this position would argue that the prioritization of peer acceptance that is characteristic of the adolescent period would interfere with the influence of positive messages such as encouraging self-compassion (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). In this sense, pressures to fit in and align with peer norms, especially those enforced by social media through self-comparison, would be too powerful to be outweighed by more mentally healthy perspectives. It is suggested that habits that are not peer-enforced or popular among adolescents are not sensitive to change, even when promoted by influencers. In one study influencers that promoted consumption of healthy snacks showed no significant effect on

adolescent consumption of such foods (Folkvord & de Brujine, 2020). Simple promotion of healthy habits will not directly equate to increased participation by followers. Adolescents are more motivated to fit in and be liked by their peers than gain perspective on mentally healthy ways to perceive their experiences and interactions on social media (Blakemore & Mills, 2014).

In response to this argument, it is important to consider what the influential power of influencers is rooted in – their perceived relatability (Lou & Kim, 2019). Adolescents view influencers as peers, some reporting that they feel even more understood by their favourite influencer than by their friends (O'Neill-Hart & Blumenstein, 2016). By this standard, combining influencers popularity and high regard with a level of trust equaling or surpassing friendships, adolescents will adopt self-compassion practices that are promoted by influencers. Perhaps not all healthy habits, such as healthy eating, will incite enough motivation to change adolescent behaviour, but adolescents feel the effects of insecurity heavily and being taught that it is a good thing to accept yourself is deeply meaningful. If adolescents are struggling to gain the approval of their peers but are often seeing their favourite influencer reminding them to be kind to themselves and that they are not defined by their mistakes, these encouragements from someone they highly value will be more impactful than negative peer interactions.

Considering these arguments, using influencers to promote the principles and practice of self-compassion to adolescents will decrease the negative effects experienced in high usage of social media platforms. Issues of insecurity and self-comparison are known to be consequences of social media use, especially for adolescents as they have yet to reach physical and emotional maturation (Crone & Konjin, 2018). Studies have begun to investigate the relationships between adolescents and influencers, finding the adolescent perception of relatability and friendship with influencers as well as the great influential power for which influencers have the capacity (Hassan et al., 2021; Hendriks et al., 2020). Adolescent fascination with and enjoyment of influencer content is ever-increasing as social media use becomes more dominating of daily life. The position that adolescents resist responsible change considering peer norms that emphasize popularity and social media presence is thought-provoking, except that influencers are perceived on a similar level to peers, therefore holding the power to create change that counters peer norms (Lou & Kim, 2019). Self-compassion has been consistent in its yielding of beneficial outcomes, even directly in response to the negative effects of social media (Neff & Germer, 2017; Slater et

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al., 2017). Especially considering the research conducted specifically on adolescents and self-compassion, engagement in self-compassion must be encouraged in adolescents to negate the associated consequences of the ever-increasing dependency on social media (Bluth & Blanton, 2014; Bluth et al., 2016).

Successful implementation of self-compassion in adolescents holds implications for reducing prevalence of mental illness, and more specifically depression in adolescents (Neff & Germer, 2017). Adolescent depression rates increased by over 60% between the years of 2011 and 2018 and increasing technology use is thought to be a contributing factor to this drop in young mental health (Twenge, 2020). Future research should study the effects of positive messages promoted by influencers and if they hold similar longevity in and popularity with adolescents as content with implicit messages of envy and perfection. The solution to provide self-compassion messages through the same lens that self-comparison is encouraged is advantageous because of the amount of time spent by adolescents on social media and their trust in influencer recommendations (Mediakix, 2018; Hassan et al., 2021). This solution is empirically supported by studies examining how adolescents follow what is promoted and encouraged by influencers (Hassan et al., 2021; Hendriks et al., 2020; Pilgram & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019).

Limitations of this argument include who would pay the influencers to promote self-compassion, as it is not coined by a brand or company, like most other sponsorships. Bell began the Bell Let's Talk movement in 2010, bringing attention to mental health concerns each year and working to both break the stigma of mental illness and raise money to help those suffering (Bell Canada, 2021). This example shows the potential that large companies such as Bell have to make positive changes through social media. A possible avenue for self-compassion ambassadorships could be through the support of a partnered company in a similar humanitarian act to Bell Let's Talk. In light of the need for a solution to the harm adolescents experience from social media, a contributor to broadly increased rates of depression in young people, self-compassion holds great promise to become that very solution. Through the recruitment of social media influencers for promotion, self-compassion will rise in adolescents and effectively reduce the negative influence of social media's self-comparison and insecurity on the young generation.

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