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English 400

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Social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and Snapchat have all become household names due to their popularity especially amongst today’s adolescent generation. Each social media site serves a different purpose to its users. Tumblr, for example offers blogging. Opinionated posts under 140 characters can be shared on Twitter. There are sites strictly dedicated to sharing pictures like Instagram and Snapchat, and then there are sites like Facebook who incorporate all three facets. What humans have learned over the course of our experimentation with the Internet and social networking is that opinion-based sharing, photo sharing, and blogging can be an intimidating combination of choices for teens because the possibilities of what they can share with their virtual friends is endless. The Internet became a scary place when we started letting it control us to the point where “we aren’t using proper grammar[,] […] [w]e have shorter attention spans[,] […] [w]e aren’t spending quality time with each other[,] […] [w]e are limiting our thoughts[,] [and] [w]e are forgetting to live in the moment” (Schleusner). Social media has made the people of this generation narcissistic because we have conformed to always updating our followers in cyberspace about what’s new in our lives. Teens, specifically teenage girls, are the age group most likely to live most of their lives behind a screen having fake relations with their peers and predators behind another screen. Teens’ lives escalate quickly online, so much in fact that “[h]igh school-age girls have in recent years been the focus of an avalanche of studies and articles about how certain kinds of social media posts, selfies, or followers, can lead to issues like depression, anorexia, bullying, and even murder” (Selinger-Morris). Young women are very impressionable and it toys with their emotions when they see ads, postings, pictures, or comments that are provocative. Young women go on the Internet and “watch video clips full of clothed men and scantily attired women and [think] ‘that’s what we have to do to prove we are a woman’” (Gorman). Social media companies may believe that “[t]he real problem isn’t something tangible like sexting or bullying which adults focus on in patronizing and unimaginative ways. The real problem relates to conformity. Adolescents are compelled to act the stereotype because those who opt out commit themselves to social leprosy” (Gorman). Social media corporations need to realize that young girls make too many life-altering mistakes on social media in order to look more desirable. Therefore, social media corporations should better enforce the age restriction laws on their sites to protect our youth and work with school systems to create classes that offer social media awareness and serve as a self-esteem workshop to young women.

Social media has been made popular partly from the expense of young women who expose too much of themselves online. Some users feed off of these women such as teenage boys and online predators. There isn’t enough awareness being spread to the youth about online predators and “[t]he moment you give [that] access to primary school girls, they’re going to make mistakes […] [t]hey don’t have the maturity to understand the consequences of what they’re doing and they kind of get carried away” (Selinger-Morris). Many parents do not see the dangers of these sites because they are stuck in a different generation. Parents think that Instagram is full of people posting what they ate for lunch and their ‘outfits of the day’. What parents fail to see is that Instagram puts a lot more pressure on teenage girls to look perfect. Unfortunately, other sites are to blame as well such as “Live.ly, […] which is extraordinarily popular among primary school-age girls [and], ‘is full of predators and those streaming porn and self-harm’” (Selinger-Morris). What parents and young girls don’t realize is the online predator is not always a creepy 40-year-old man masked by the virtual persona of an Abercrombie and Fitch model; the predator could simply be a boy from school online as himself. Boys have more access to violent websites and pornographic paraphernalia than ever before and according to young girls, boys are overbearing toward their female classmates online through social media sites. “13-year-old Sophia explains […] ‘They judge you if you don’t send nudes like you’re a prude. But if you just laugh, then they’ll be aggravated, but they wont do anything bad to you… [such as] start rumors’” (Dawson). Girls are treated as though sending a provocative picture of themselves to a boy they know isn’t a big deal, however, young girls don’t realize where that picture may end up going, so girls “have conversations with boys who [ask for nudes] and they think, ‘Maybe this is how I have a relationship,’” (Dawson). Girls are being dehumanized by men of all ages on the Internet and this creates “[i]ncreasing [stress] on girls and young women, ranging from academic pressure to their increasing sexualization and objectification amplified by social media” (Sexed Up Social Media Damaging Girls’ Mental Health Study Suggests). Teenage angst is part of the adolescent experience and is unavoidable in most cases because “[t]eenagers have certainly always had sex, experimented with drugs, bullied each other and gotten into trouble […] [but] social media magnifies these existing tendencies and makes young women matter less- they have less agency, less inclination to speak up about the online behavior that has become prevalent” (Dawson). Young women need to know that they have a voice and social media is slowly taking it away from them with lack of boundaries provided to young social networkers.

Young girls have a lack of self-esteem due to what they see on the Internet such as explicit ads, pictures, and videos of women. Girls have a hard time knowing what is right and wrong when they see certain images on the Internet. A young girl sees an older woman dressed in a suggestive outfit and suddenly that young girl thinks dressing that way is okay because young girls are looking up to these older women as role models. Social networking blurs the lines for young women as to what is appropriate and what isn’t because of what media is shown of women. “Researchers conducted an online survey among 881 Dutch adolescents between 10 ad 19 years of age. The researchers measured social self-esteem, well-being, use of friend networking sites, frequency of reactions to profiles, and tone of reactions to profiles. The research concluded that 49.3% of the reactions to their profile were predominantly negative and 28.4% of the reactions were predominantly positive” (Social Media Affects Self Esteem). This research shows that this epidemic is not only prominent in the United States it is a global issue amongst our youth. As a solution, “women on social media with low self-esteem issues show their skin and wear revealing outfits to feel “better” about their own body by taking into account how many likes on Instagram or Facebook they receive” (Social Media Affects Self Esteem) because “the number of likes on Facebook/Instagram or retweets on Twitter is used as a tool of verification for acceptance within their group of peers” (Social Media Affects Self Esteem). The epidemic is not only spreading globally, it is trickling down to younger pre-teen ages, “[i]t was 17-year-old girls speaking out about the pressure to mimic Kim Kardashian in selfies, in a “sexual rat race” with teenage boys, now it is not uncommon to hear stories of 11 and 12-year-olds buckling under the same stress” (Sellinger-Morris). The reason self-esteem issues are spreading to frighteningly younger ages is because children are being given cell phones at a younger age and “[a]t least 60 per cent of the 10 and 11-year-old children […] at schools were on at least one social media site, with the majority using age-restricted platforms” (Sellinger-Morris). Self-image issues are a recipe for other issues weighing on the mental health of our young women around the world and “[t]he study by University College London (UCL) and the Anna Freud Centre found that emotional problems have risen 55 percent over the last five years, with the worst affected being young girls aged 11-13 years” (Sexed Up Social Media Damaging Girls’ Mental Health, Study Suggests) predominantly linked to social media.

Social media companies need to recognize how hyper-sexualized their sites are and need to start enforcing more strict age limitations as well as work with school systems to give quality courses to students on social networking and self-love education. Social media corporations may think they are not responsible for the damage that has been caused to countless numbers of teens that have been exposed by others on social media sites. Of course there are issues that have persisted on the Internet that no one could foresee. However, I think limiting who goes on these sites and keeping the audience at a mature age level will decrease the numbers of suicides and mental health patients under the age of 17. I also believe that young women’s self esteem will be able to mature healthily the longer they are able to stay off social media, and this can only really happen if social media corporations start taking their age limitations more seriously. Furthermore, utilizing a school program that teaches children about the dangers of the Internet and why it is important to stay aware of what they are posting and sharing is crucial in helping the world’s youth. The Internet has become “a chaotic mix of nude photos, cyber bullying, and dysfunctional relationships” (Dawson) and parents are less than knowledgeable about technology. This is why it is up to the social media companies such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Snapchat, etc. who know about social media trends and vocabulary to make it safer for young people and continue to instill the values that children now need in the digital age. This program could be beneficial to young girls whose self-esteem has deteriorated due to social media use. Young girls could learn that “[u]ltimately, selfies don’t have to be about likes or comments. Sure, everyone enjoys a bit of admiration, but it’s also about your relationship with yourself” (Tatum). Self-love is important for young women to know and I am certain that parents do a great job of teaching their daughters what it means to love themselves, but I think we need to focus on the technology side of self-love. This program would be a great way to introduce young women to what self-love looks like on social media. Adolescent girls need to be shown pictures of confident women who feel beautiful in their own skin without all of the extra filters and skin showing in their pictures. Young women need to know what real role models look like and it is up to social media corporations to start contributing to women’s self esteem and empowerment.

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