

**The Fraudulent Nature of Social Media and the Impressionability of**

**Adolescents**

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When I was a sophomore at Fordham University, an old friend from Brown University camp (her name will be Sarah for the sake of the story) enrolled as a freshman. Naturally, we already had been following each other on Instagram and snapchat since our time together at Brown. As luck would have it, we ended up attending the same college, and I preceded her by a year. Shortly after Fordham's Orientation, she began constantly posting on social media with pictures of her many friends, outings and common college weekend activities. I remember looking at her snapchat story one time and thinking, "Wow, Sarah already has so many friends and is really taking advantage of the city. I wish I had that many friends my first couple months at Fordham". At the beginning of Fordham, I was really only close with my two roommates, so I was shocked that she already formed so many bonds. Of course, I was happy for her but at the same time I was jealous. Why hadn't I been able to make as many friends in the short amount of time she had been there? Is there something wrong with me? I quickly pushed the matter to the back of my mind, but each time I saw her posts on social media, I was reminded of my own insecurities. Then, one day I received a text from Sarah. A basic, "How are you?" text, and we exchanged some niceties: "How are you?", "I miss you!", and "We should catch up soon!". Nothing was out of the ordinary until she sent a text saying (and I will never forget it), "By the way how do you make close friends at Fordham? I feel like I'm having a hard time haha[sic]." In this moment, I realized that social media is a lie. While Sarah was convincingly portraying her active social life, in reality she was dealing with the same doubts that I was having at the beginning of my college career. That interaction made me realize that things we see on social media are only partially true. Social media really is a place where we try to display our ideal selves or a more socially acceptable self. A self that portrays a perfect and covetable lifestyle.

This brings me into the biggest ethical problem I have with social media: the dishonesty of “Instagram influencers” and celebrities and the impressionability of adolescents. First, of course there cannot exist regulations of the type of content we post on social media except for dangerous content such as hate speech and violence because of freedom of speech. At the same time, due to the free reign of what we can post, individuals with a massive following post unrealistic pictures, and young kids are taking this as the cold truth. Because they are younger, they do not realize what goes into posting a perfect life on social media, and as a result, compare their *real* life to this photoshopped one. And when they cannot achieve social media perfection, this can lead to a plethora of psychological issues (Miller et al.). This is due to the rapid growth period that people experience as teenagers. Scientifically speaking, during teenage years, the amygdala (the part of the brain that is responsible for emotional responses) develops first (Casey 80). Conversely, the prefrontal cortex (the part of the brain responsible for reasoning) develops much later (Casey 80). This means that teenagers are bombarded with an array of emotions with no way to rationalize them. And so, without being able to reconcile that fact that it takes a copious effort that to post the “perfect” picture, their emotions get the better of them.

I believe it is the duty of these celebrities to convey the work that goes into portraying this kind of life. Since they have a big platform and their content reaches a such large number of people, it is their responsibility of ensuring their content is not taken out of context. I do not know exactly how this can be turned into a systematic procedure that ensures these influencers are informing their audiences of the inauthenticity of their posts, but right now there is no protocol. It is like if someone watched *The Avengers* film, and then became sad because they did not have superpowers. I know it sounds ridiculous, but that simple metaphor is really what is happening on social media. Young kids are looking at these influencers and wondering why they

do not look the same and live the same lifestyle. I just want to tell them, that Jaclyn Hill (a very popular influencer) is not even Jaclyn Hill. She is different than what she portrays on Instagram and Snapchat, and it is silly and dangerous to think otherwise especially if you are an adolescent who is in the process of developing your identity.

Many of these Instagram influencers have a whole team of people coming up with ideas of what the perfect picture would be. They take professional photos of them and professionals edit the pictures. For example, an influencer named Jay Alvarez has an account dedicated to posting pictures of him travelling to some of the most beautiful places in the world. One look at his account, and it is difficult not to be envious of him. It can cause adolescents to compare their normal life to this perfect one. In reality, Jay is not simply traveling to wherever destiny takes him. Many times he is paid to market products in these areas. He really is not having as much fun as it looks like he is having. An even bigger problem than Jay's account are beauty/lifestyle/fashion Instagram stars such as Kylie Jenner. Simply put, these women have a lot of money going into their clothes, makeup, looks, etc... It is their job to look perfect, but high school and middle school girls are comparing their normal but *real* selves to these unrealistic beauty standards. This takes a hit to their self-esteem, which results in mental well-being issues (Miller et al.). I feel that adolescents are going through enough especially with regards to their growing place in society, and this extra burden of the unattainable lives of social media stars is too much for them. We need to spread the message that social media should be looked at like a movie: it is interesting but fake. One time, I even posted a mini experiment of my own to my Instagram story. I posted a scenic picture of Manhattan; I was very high up so I had a good shot of the Manhattan skyline. I immediately had comments about how nice the picture was and, "take me with you" comments. It looked as if I was on some rooftop having a great time. In

actuality, that picture was taken from a window of the building where I was taking the GRE. It was on the 25th floor so I had a good view of the city. What looked like a great outing in the city was actually just a required exam day for me. If it was that easy for me to put this façade on social media, imagine how easy it is for Instagram influencers who have money and resources.

I think it is perfectly normal and even beneficial for young people to have and aspire to their idols. And with the rise of social media, these idols have increasingly become social media influencers. However, it is the duty of the influencer to recognize their impact on teenagers' lives. They should use their platforms to convey either more realistic expectations or highlight the fact that their lives are not perfect. By doing so, this can reduce the identity crisis and major upset teenagers go through when they are unable to attain this impossible lifestyle. Ultimately, social media is very good at painting a fake but beautiful portrait. Subscribing to a fantasy can be fun, as long as the viewer recognizes its just that, a fantasy.

Casey, B. J. “The Teenage Brain: An Overview.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2013, pp. 80–81.

Miller, D. et al. “Does Social Media Make People Happier?” *How the World Changed Social Media*, by 1st ed., vol. 1, UCL Press, London, 2016, pp. 193–204.