

The Influence of Media Manipulation on Young People through the Dimension of their Perception and Understanding of Media Content in the Digital Environment

SANELA PRAŠOVIĆ GADŽO, PhD

Doctor of Communication Science

ABSTRACT: Manipulation in the media is present today as never before and, due to digital dissemination of information, it has become extremely accessible to the public. It is precisely the presence of new media and digital environment that has created a space for publicly available information to be created and released to the public by people who do not possess expertise, which directly calls into question not only the quality of the information, but its credibility as well. The digital age has also brought the presence of a number of media outlets in the form of web portals and social networks that daily disseminate a multitude of information, which is usually not backed by relevant sources and, not uncommonly, the published articles are not signed, while the portals that publish them do not even have an imprint. All of the above opens the possibility of media manipulation, to which especially young people are exposed. The posting of unreliable and manipulative information on social networks is positioned as a problem, among which Tik-Tok is the most prevalent today, with the dominant consumers of TikTok content being young people.

The paper discusses the influence of media manipulation on the public, especially on young people through the dimension of their perception of content disseminated on social networks, especially on the TikTok platform. We look at whether and what consequences manipulation in the media produces among young people and how much it affects the changing of opinions and attitudes of young people. The aim of the work is to answer the question of how much young people today recognize media manipulation and how susceptible they are to it, through direct research questions on whether TikTok content can influence young people's perception of themselves and of others, i.e. influence young people's attitudes and beliefs.

The paper also contains a quantitative survey in which respondents aged 16-20 answered previously defined research questions through the dimension of the way they use social networks, especially the TikTok network, and recognize content that contains manipulation.

KEYWORDS: young people, social networks, manipulation, influence, internet

INTRODUCTION

The media is a space where the distribution of numerous manipulative contents can be observed. Young people are most often exposed and susceptible to such content, especially because much of the information is transmitted via social networks and the consumers of such content are largely young people. We find the term media in the Latin language and thus *medius* means an intermediate or one through which communication is transmitted.

The problem with content that is disseminated via the media, especially new media, is that a good mechanism of control has not been established to effectively determine whether information is true or not. Metzger (2007) states that there is no universal standard prescribed by information editors and therefore digital information can be easily altered, misinterpreted, plagiarized or misquoted.

Although the use of social media by older people has increased in recent years, young people are still the most frequent users of social media (Pew Research Center, 2019).

The problem is even greater when it comes to distribution of information in new media, among which the Tik Tok platform is one of the most appealing to young people. Tik Tok is also one of the most questionable platforms in terms of content, where media content is published without adequate control, not uncommonly with a variety of challenges and trends that young people are most susceptible to.

TikTok, a platform owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, may function as a digital analog of the ideological machinery described in Manufacturing Consent. With 1 billion active users worldwide, TikTok holds a vast audience (Backlinko, 2024).

The Influence of Media Manipulation on Young People through the Dimension of their Perception and Understanding of Media Content in the Digital Environment

With regard to distribution of media information containing manipulation, it is important to recall that Tanta (2007) stated that "the one who manipulates intends to make others believe that what he or she says about something or someone is important to them and do what he or she thinks is good for them".

In this paper, we analyze the influence of the TikTok social network on young people through the dimension of the question of how much young people today recognize media manipulation and manipulation of facts, how aware they are of the presence of media bias, and how susceptible they are to it.

The paper also contains a quantitative survey in which respondents aged 16-20 answered questions on recognition of content in the media that contains manipulation, as well as content posted on the TikTok social network.

Prior consent for the implementation of the survey was obtained from the parents of minors within a given 15-day timeframe, after which the survey was carried out on a sample of 95 young respondents aged 16-20 in a 30-day period. Some of the young survey participants attend high school, while others are students.

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Social networks have become an integral part of communication tools for young people that help them connect with each other, as well as consume and post certain information. O'Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson (2011) point out that social networks offer young people a variety of opportunities to connect with friends, classmates or people with common interests, while Kurtalić (2018) explains that young people use social networks because they want to maintain contact, encourage communication and more easily follow events and activities in the lives of existing friends, as well as meet new friends or feel accepted by friends. The same author says that young people are more comfortable talking online and this is one of the reasons why they resort to and prefer communication on social networks (Kurtalić, 2018).

Other than establishing communication through social networks, one of the problems is manifested in the influence of social networks on young people, especially on their perception of themselves, but also their perception of other people. Stein et al. (2021) draw attention to this problem, pointing out that one of the most prominent problems is precisely the influence of social media on young people's perception of body image, which can have harmful consequences on their mental health. Liu (2021) also talks about the influence on young people through the perception of physical appearance, which is emphasized in posts on the Tik Tok platform, finding that certain popular trends on the platform contain unrealistic body standards. Previous research suggests that frequent use of social media can lead to appearance-based social comparison (Saiphoo and Vahedi, 2019). Consequently, Rodgers and Melioli (2016) point out that young people face unrealistic body standards on social networks, while Saiphoo and Vahedi (2019) explain that many users of social networks engage in constant upward social comparison, which results in a more negative image of their own body. This effect may be particularly strong among the younger generation on social media, as they are highly prone to peer judgment of their physical appearance (Brechtwald and Prinstein, 2011; Thompson et al., 1999).

In 2020, TikTok disclosed that more than one-third of its daily 49 million users were under the age of 14 in the United States. The proportion of users younger than 14 was as high as 43% in Britain and 45% in France. With a total number of downloads that reached two billion globally (Feller and Burroughs, 2022; Sherman, 2020).

MANIPULATIVE MEDIA CONTENT

The Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of manipulation is "to manage or utilize skillfully" and "to control ... by artful, unfair, or insidious means especially to one's own advantage."¹

The same dictionary defines social media as: "forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos)".²

The emergence of social networks has not only changed the media landscape; it has also changed the view of daily life for hundreds of millions of users who use available social networks in the world today.

The current availability of information distributed on social networks, which is not territorially or geographically limited, has given social networks an important place in the communication spectrum, but has also consequently led to questioning the credibility of the information published on these platforms. Osharive (2015) warns that, although social networks have negative effects on adolescents, such as lack of privacy, distracting students from their academic work, taking up most of their productive time and the like, they also have advantages and can be used appropriately.

Previous research confirms that more and more people find and consume news on social media platforms as opposed to traditional forms of media, such as radio, press and television (Pew Research, 2016).³ Green and Donahue (2011) state that, especially in the "post-truth" era, once a false story is found online or published, it may be too late to retract, correct or negate its impact. Domonoske

¹ Merriam-Webster. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manipulation>.

² Merriam-Webster. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/socialmedia>.

³ The research found that 62% of American adults receive their news from social media, considerably higher than 49% in 2012.

The Influence of Media Manipulation on Young People through the Dimension of their Perception and Understanding of Media Content in the Digital Environment

(2016) recalls a Stanford University study that revealed the inability of high school and university students to identify fake information in tweets and articles. The lead author of the study believes that young people should be taught "to read like fact-checkers" (Domonoske, 2016, 34).

Most applications used by children have functionalities guided by manipulative design, with features that adopt manufactured time pressure, navigation restrictions and even "baits" to encourage longer gameplay or more purchases (Radesky et al., 2022).

It makes sense to analyze what kind of impact the content posted on social networks, which may be manipulative, has on users, especially young people. This leads us to the question of whether young consumers of content on social networks recognize fake information and manipulative content and whether their perception and beliefs change as a result of content published on social networks.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE TIKTOK SOCIAL NETWORK ON YOUNG PEOPLE

TikTok is a social network for the distribution or sharing of video content owned by the ByteDance company. The network's website states that its mission is to "inspire creativity and bring joy" to users (TikTok, 2022).

Content on the platform is produced and posted by users, many of whom are young people between the ages of 13 and 18 who make up half of the TikTok social network's monthly users (Kurzrock, 2019).

Although TikTok was launched only in 2017, the platform was soon positioned as one of the most downloaded applications in the world (Sensor Tower, 2021). In the United States, 60% of active TikTok users are between the ages of 16 and 24 (Reuters, 2019). Such users open the app eight times a day and spend an average of 46 minutes on the app every day (Kerry et al., 2019).

All of this directly implies the potential influence of content posted on TikTok on young people, especially since the platform, through artificial intelligence, efficiently and very quickly determines the content that users like and stay on the most, likely resulting in longer use of TikTok than intended, which can also cause addiction to TikTok (Montag et al., 2021). Bresnick (2019) argues that the TikTok mobile application corresponds to the virtual structure of a game, i.e. it is a recreational space manifested in electronic media. So-called virtual playgrounds are digital experiences that correspond to experiences on a physical playground, and for this reason children and adolescents are the application's most frequent consumers (Bresnick, 2019).

TikTok users are mostly children and young people, a vulnerable group that is extremely susceptible to the negative consequences of potentially malicious content. An additional problem is that TikTok users should not be younger than 13 years old, but it is not uncommon for younger children to register by falsely stating an older age. This indicates that by posting their video content, children are actually revealing personal information such as their actual age, places they visit, presence and absence of parents, place of residence, and so on. All of the above makes children under 13 an easy target. Teenagers are also potentially an easy target because parents monitor their online activities less actively and are insufficiently aware of the extent and intensity of the dangers lurking for their children on TikTok. Young people between the ages of 16 and 18 are no less exposed. It is quite certain that the majority of young people who create and post videos on TikTok are not really aware of the danger of sharing private information with a lot of people they do not even know, nor have ever met.

A specific problem associated with this social network is the so-called trends and challenges. Many young people follow such content and some of this content is potentially dangerous, not only for the mental health of young people, but also for their lives. TikTok challenges are started by the social network's users in order to get more followers and gain popularity. In the challenges, users are asked to record videos, often of extremely dangerous situations, which the challenge requests. Over the past few years, media from all over the world have reported about sadly fatal outcomes of minors who were following a challenge posted on TikTok. The "blackout" challenge, also known as the choking challenge or pass-out challenge, is a dangerous trending game in which children and young people put a belt around their necks. They tighten it and record themselves until they lose consciousness. In Palermo, a 10-year-old girl choked herself to death while taking part in the challenge and recording herself on TikTok with her mobile phone. A boy from Serbia was also killed by the so-called "blackout" challenge on Tik Tok and his parents found him hanging.

TikTok is also associated with hate speech, especially in comments on posted video content; not uncommonly these comments are very cruel and harsh and may upset young people, shake their self-confidence, and lead to suicidal thoughts, depression and anxiety. A young man from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mladen Dulić, committed suicide in October 2022 because he was mocked on the TikTok social network.⁴

Young people on TikTok often follow the profiles of influencers who do not portray themselves as they are in real life, resulting in young people feeling pressure as a result of unrealistic expectations of a perfect life or appearance. This is precisely why adolescents and young people acquire an inaccurate perspective of what the media presents to them, diminish their worth and damage their self-confidence (Borić-Letica and Velki, 2019).

⁴ <https://radiosarajevo.ba/vijesti/bosna-i-hercegovina/tragedija-potresla-bih-mladic-pocinio-samoubistvo-zbog-tiktok-snimka-na-kojem-ga-ponizavaju/473412>

The Influence of Media Manipulation on Young People through the Dimension of their Perception and Understanding of Media Content in the Digital Environment

All of the above illustrates the extremely negative influence of the TikTok platform on children and young people. In the survey we conducted, we will present data on how much young people trust content from this social network and how much influence the posted content has on them.

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The influence of social networks in raising and educating young people today is unquestionable. Diklić et al. (2019) state that social networks and their accelerated growth have changed the way young people spend their free time, their awareness, the way they communicate, and their mutual relationships.

In the previous theoretical part of the paper, we looked at how social networks, especially TikTok, can affect the lives of young people who increasingly use modern technologies.

The goal of the research is to identify the impact of the TikTok social network on young people, through the questions that we aim to answer with this research:

- Can TikTok content influence young people's perception of themselves?
- Can TikTok content influence young people's perception of others?
- Can TikTok content influence the attitudes and beliefs of young people?
- Do young people believe that content published on the TikTok social network is true?

RESEARCH METHOD

Preparation for the research began in November 2024, by sending an electronic invitation and contacting 100 young people who are students of high schools and universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As the research is based on a quantitative paradigm and questionnaires, online survey questionnaires were the optimal choice for conducting the research.

Of the originally planned 100 research participants, 95 accepted the invitation. Since some of them are minors, we needed the consent of their parents, which we also requested electronically. The process of obtaining parental consent took an additional 15 days. The research was implemented in December 2024.

SAMPLE

The sample used in the research is probabilistic, i.e. a simple random sample. High school and university students from Bosnia and Herzegovina participated in the research. The total number of respondents, out of the total sample number, who voluntarily participated in the research is 95 (N=95). More female (62.9%) than male respondents (37.1%) took part in the research.

The majority of the respondents are 16-17 years old (a total of 45.7%), followed by respondents aged 18-20 (37.2%), while 17.1% are respondents aged 17-18.

PROCEDURES AND INSTRUMENTS

For the purpose of conducting the research, a survey procedure was used and a survey questionnaire was created in online Google Forms. The first part consists of a short introduction explaining to respondents the goal and purpose of the research, method of data storage, ensuring anonymity and voluntary participation, as well as the possibility of pulling out of the research at any point. It was also stated that the data are confidential and will only be used for the scientific purpose of writing this paper.

The questionnaire consists of a series of questions examining habits in the use of social networks, with particular focus on the TikTok platform.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to analyze the answers to the previously defined research questions, a look should first be taken at the indicators on how much young people aged 16 to 20 use social networks and how much time they spend on the TikTok social network.

All respondents, a total of 95 of them, confirmed that they have profiles on social networks. According to the answers of most respondents, 93 of them, or 94.3%, have profiles on the TikTok platform, while the second social network that respondents prefer is Instagram, on which a total of 90 respondents (85.7%) confirmed having a user account. The research found that the respondents have the fewest user profiles on Twitter, merely 37.1%.

According to the obtained data, we can conclude that the TikTok social network is the most popular among young people and leads in terms of use compared to other social networks, i.e. high school and university students in Bosnia and Herzegovina use TikTok more than Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat or Twitter.

This was additionally confirmed in the research and in the responses to the question on which social network they use the most. The respondents, 88.6 % of them, confirmed that they use TikTok the most, while the the next network used by 51.4 % is Instagram. It is interesting that none of the respondents answered that they use Facebook.

The Influence of Media Manipulation on Young People through the Dimension of their Perception and Understanding of Media Content in the Digital Environment

The research also examined how much time young people spend on social networks and how much time they spend per day using the TikTok network platform. We pointed out the importance of these data in the theoretical part of the work.

When asked how much time they spend on social networks daily, the biggest number of respondents answered that they spend 5 hours or more a day, 34.3% respondents. This information is extremely worrying and should be the subject of future research.

This is followed by the answer of 2-3 hours, which was given by 31.4% respondents, while 25.7% of the respondents spend 3-5 hours a day on social networks. The fewest number of respondents is active on social networks 1-2 hours daily on average, which is merely 8.6% respondents.

The above-presented information on the time that young people spend during the day using social networks points to the fact that *"a big part of the emotional and social development of adolescents happens online, thus building and shaping adolescents' social identity"* (Renau et al., 2013, according to Ortiz and Garrido, 2019).

Respondents also answered a question on how much time a day they use the TikTok social network. In the responses to this question, it is interesting that the respondents answered differently in equal proportions. Thus, respondents (25.7%) stated that they spend 3-5 hours a day on the TikTok social network. Another (25.7%) answered that they spend 1-2 hours a day on the TikTok network. This is followed by 5 hours and more, which was confirmed by respondents (22.9%), and then 2-3 hours, which is the daily use of 20% respondents. Only 5.7% respondents stated that they spend less than 1 hour a day on the TikTok social network. To the question of what content they watch or follow the most on the TikTok social network, the highest proportion of respondents, 38.4%, said these are challenges or trends. This is followed by content about fashion, with 23.5% and then sports content, which was confirmed by 17.6%. Respondents (20.5%) stated that they follow content about cooking, travel, funny clips.

For 79.4%, the TikTok social network mostly serves for entertainment, while 20.6% of them stated that they follow specific content and celebrity profiles on TikTok.

Out of the total 95 respondents, 14.7% responded that TikTok serves them for learning. It is also interesting to note that only 11.8% responded that this social network serves them to meet other people, while 8.8% stated that they use TikTok for communication.

The research found that the majority of the respondents (57.1%) think that social networks do not depict the real world. However, a large percentage of the respondents, 34.3%, stated their belief that social networks depict the real world, while 8.6% respondents answered that they do not have an opinion on this issue.

Most respondents, 40% of them, said that they do not believe posts on social networks, but at the same time, 34.3% respondents, answered that they believe the content published on social networks, while 25.7% did not express their position on this issue.

The respondents stated that they watch videos on TikTok the most, with 92 out of 95 respondents or 97% confirming this, while (81.8%) like posts. The research confirmed that 48.5% of the respondents, share videos of other users of the network on the TikTok platform, while only (15.2%) of them create and share their own videos. Merely 18.2% respondents comment on other users' posts. When asked whether they follow specific trends or challenges on TikTok, the majority of the respondents answered in the affirmative, i.e. 72.7% respondents. When asked whether they are susceptible to some challenges or trends, 58.1% respondents answered in the affirmative and 41.9% respondents answered in the negative.

To the next question on which challenges or trends they were susceptible to on the TikTok network, the respondents answered descriptively. Sixty-two of the total 95 answered that they were susceptible to many challenges, without specifying what these were. In the responses of the remaining 34.28% respondents, it was stated that they tried the AI Manga challenge and others, various sports challenges, fashion tips and trends, fitness recommendations, cooking, dieting, clothing.

The research also showed that the majority of the respondents 45.5% believe that content posted on the TikTok social network is true, while 27.3% respondents answered in the negative to this question. The remaining 27.2% respondents answered that some content is true and some is not, depending on context.

The respondents answered the next several questions on the influence of the TikTok social network on participants' behavior.

When asked whether content posted on TikTok affects them, the majority of the respondents answered affirmatively, 63.6% respondents, while 35.4% respondents answered negatively and one respondent answered descriptively: *"Other than wasting time on TikTok, I don't think it affects me as a person"*.

When asked to describe the influence that the TikTok social network potentially has on them, the respondents answered differently; 31.43% respondents stated that the influence was positive, while 45.71% respondents stated that they changed their personal opinions on something under the influence of certain posts.

The respondents also answered that some content posted on the TikTok platform helped them with self-confidence, 17.14% respondents confirmed their susceptibility to fashion trends, while 5.72% respondents confirmed that they personally apply something they see on TikTok.

When it comes to potential marketing influence of posts from TikTok on the network's young users, the research confirmed that this influence undoubtedly exists, since as many as 75.8% out of the 95 respondents stated that they often want to buy a product

The Influence of Media Manipulation on Young People through the Dimension of their Perception and Understanding of Media Content in the Digital Environment

they see previously in posts on the TikTok social network. Merely 24.2% respondents are not susceptible to buying products they see in TikTok posts.

In the answer to the next question, it is evident that the influence of posts and susceptibility to them does not only concern the marketing of certain products, but the influence is also reflected on perception of personality. Thus, 55.9% respondents answered that posts from TikTok affect the perception of their personality, while 44.1% respondents answered in the negative. It is important to emphasize here that previous research also found that the use of social media harms body image (Saiphoo and Vahedi, 2019).

Posts on the TikTok social network also affect the respondents' perception of other people, which was confirmed by 70.6% respondents, while 29.4% respondents gave a negative answer to this question.

Young users of the TikTok social network mostly answered in the affirmative to the question of whether posts from the TikTok social network influence their attitudes; 67.6% respondents believe that this kind of influence does exist, while 32.4% respondents responded in the negative to this question.

The research also confirmed that TikTok posts influence the respondents' perception of their own appearance, which can be seen from the response of 72.7% who confirmed this, while 27.3% respondents deny such influence.

It is important to point out here that Lewis and Currie (2009) maintained that social media platforms provide their users with many opportunities for comparison with peers, because they can compare not only with celebrities and models, but also with images of people they perceive as peers. This implies that social networks potentially offer young people a large space for creating different comparisons that may consequently affect young people's perception of their own bodies.

When asked whether they recognize false information in posts on the TikTok social network, 97.1% of the respondents answered in the affirmative, i.e. 94 out of the total 95 respondents answered that they recognize false information, while 1 respondent answered this question in the negative.

We were interested in having respondents descriptively answer the question of what information they see as false or assume to be untrue. Here are some of their answers:

- "A lot of it is fake, fortune-telling, time travelers, ghosts, perfect looks..."
- "When someone announces that they lost 10 kg of weight in 10 days"
- "A lot of it is fake. Stories about walking ghosts, all girls like photo models, politicians when they come in with promises, etc."
- "Politics"
- "Mostly those when they appear in a video as ghosts".

The last question in the research was whether social networks shape respondents' opinions on important issues in life. The majority of the 95 respondents, 67.55% of them, answered in the negative, while 25.7% respondents stated that they believe that social networks can shape their opinions on important issues. An interesting answer was given by one respondent who answered descriptively: *"Of course not, maybe sometimes they create a different opinion regarding some little things that are virtually unimportant, but as far as some important decisions in life are concerned, social networks do not influence me"*, while 5.7% respondents stated that influence on important issues in life is *"sometimes"* possible.

CONCLUSION

The research findings in this paper undoubtedly showed that the majority of young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina today use social networks and have user profiles on them and also that they use the TikTok network the most, followed by Instagram, Snapchat, etc. It is interesting that the network that was most popular not so long ago, Facebook, was not singled out by young people aged 16-20 who participated in the research as the one they spend time on.

The research also confirmed that most of them spend an average of 3 hours a day on TikTok, most of which they spend following specific content, among which challenges, trends, sports content and fashion were dominant.

A smaller number of young people use TikTok to follow educational content or to communicate and generally meet other people. The focus of young people's interest on the TikTok social network is not personal posts with video content, but mostly liking or sharing other users' posts.

The research has proven the connection of posts on the TikTok social network with influence on young people. The influence is manifested as influence on perception of one's own personality and influence on perception of personal appearance. Influence on young people's perception of other people was also established.

These influences may be investigated in further research to determine why young people are susceptible to influence, especially because users of social networks, especially TikTok, often face dangers present through various challenges or trends posted on this social network. We wrote in detail in the theoretical part of this paper about the various dangers present on the TikTok social network and the tragic consequences.

The Influence of Media Manipulation on Young People through the Dimension of their Perception and Understanding of Media Content in the Digital Environment

Based on the research conducted in this paper, it is useful to point out the necessity of discussing the influence of social networks on children and young people in education institutions. In particular, education institutions need to have defined content on media education and familiarize children and young people with it with the aim of preventative action in connection with potential dangerous influence of social networks.

The findings of this research lead us to Festinger (1954), who argued that comparison with peers is based on the fact that people are most likely to compare themselves to others whom they perceive to be similar to themselves, while for Heinberg and Thompson, (1992) this is the most influential type of social comparison.

With the aim of successfully conducting future research, the limitations present in the implementation of this research need to be pointed out, which concern finding respondents and their willingness to participate in the research.

The results obtained in this research conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina are a good starting point for further research on this topic in related sciences.

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The Influence of Media Manipulation on Young People through the Dimension of their Perception and Understanding of Media Content in the Digital Environment

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