

Social Media vs. User Age

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Propaganda has recently become extremely prominent across social media platforms. The varying ages of users on different social media platforms play a role in how propaganda is implemented on these sites. This is most clearly seen in the different ages of users on Facebook, Instagram, and Tiktok. According to the Pew Research Center, Facebook caters to many older adults, Instagram is used primarily by many Millennials, and Tiktok has taken storm with young adults and children¹. The different ages and the way older adults, millennials, and young adults interact with the internet impact the way they are influenced by the propaganda they come across while surfing the web.

Facebook, which is used by 73% of adults aged 50 to 64 and 50% of adults, aged 65 and up, is prominent among older social media users¹. Therefore, its propaganda techniques are addressed to older audiences. In the past few elections, Facebook has played a major role in influencing the sway of the votes via false information and propaganda. According to the Washington Post, microtargeting is a major part of Facebook's algorithm that leaves citizens in an information bubble monopolized by one side². Microtargeting advertisements have a low cost, and there can be thousands of ads on the same theme that are sent to a variety of targeted users, as seen by Donald Trump's 2016 campaign with 5.9 million total ads from just June to November. Canalization is prevalent on Facebook with its users being targeted on their interests, purchases, demographics, and political characteristics. For those running political campaigns, there is a Custom Audiences feature that lets these

campaigns upload lists of users taken from voter files to target with ads². The app may sell itself as a social media website to connect with friends and family, but it is now home to politics. Another way Facebook allows campaigns to better promote their message is the

Look-a-like Audiences feature, which targets new users who look similar to those that are on the targeted-users lists, thus working together with the Custom Audiences feature to find similar users. The tools Facebook has created for campaigns to rule over the site make it the perfect place to successfully promote propaganda and could lead to "racist, misogynist, anti-Semitic, anti-democratic or otherwise dangerous views"².

The ways users interact with the app have come a long way as well. They no longer update about every minuscule detail, instead, users "lurk" to see what those around them are posting³. Brands that want consumers to buy from them have also changed the methods they promote their products. Since there is so much being offered on the site, one has a moment to quickly choose what is interesting to them, which is taken advantage of by these brands. A simple impulse changes the decision that is made to like and share a product before going out to purchase it³. Companies send out personalized messages that are automatically clicked by consumers mindlessly scrolling through their feed. Even when a message is ignored, the brand can continue pestering customers with repeated ads until they give in and click on the advertisement. It is impossible to avoid these forms of advertising and propaganda, and this

phenomenon is also seen on other social media platforms as well.

Instagram is a social media website that is prevalent amongst Millennials and is used by 71% of young adults aged 18 to 29 years old¹. It is interesting to see the difference between how information and propaganda are spread on Instagram as compared to Facebook since Facebook owns Instagram and Instagram does not have an option to share posts on one's feed, rather relying on its "Story" feature. News, false or not, that does manage to spread via Instagram makes up for how over a quarter of Americans stay informed on the world around them. One of the major ways that people are informed is by influencers, small and big, that are all over the app. According to Teen Vogue, there is a growing number of influencers that are recruited by political campaigns and partisan groups to spread content in support of their political views⁴.

Smaller influencers can personally reach out to target audiences and share personal stories that their followers can more easily relate to. Interviews done by the Propaganda Research Lab at the Center for Media Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin studied the use of political influencers on social media such as Instagram and found a strong relationship between politically focused marketers, small-scale influencers, and their audiences. These "micro" influencers have been called upon by local governments to sway their local community audiences against vaccine hesitancy⁴. They are trusted by communities because they are often some of the most active members within it and have their main follower base from that area, thus allowing campaigns to use them for targeting specific communities. Campaigns using small-scale influencers can target audiences via shared interests, gender, and age while paying a cheaper pay per post than when using celebrity influencers. This allows them to

spend money on many small-scale influencers at once and spread their messages to a large variety of audiences by using tools such as influencer marketing platforms and customer-relationship management software to find, recruit, and manage influencers simultaneously⁴. These days, there is also a large market for fake influencers that buy fake followers and likes using bots to raise their engagement. This has led to the creation of "engagement pods" or groups of real people who all coordinate to increase each other's social media post engagement. They all join a group to boost each other's fame by commenting on posts as if they are long-time friends, and they can be kicked out if engagement isn't reciprocated⁴. However, while famous influencer support is certainly important and is key to gaining more listeners, the number of followers is not always what matters. Rather, it is about how many people believe the influencer to be credible.

Currently, Instagram is being targeted with anti-vaccine propaganda. The app's algorithm is supposed to show users content that will hold their attention based on their online behavior. Although the company vowed to prevent showing or recommending posts with misinformation regarding vaccines on the Instagram Explore or hashtag pages back in 2019, it seems that nothing has changed, as misinformation about the coronavirus and its vaccine is prevalent on the site⁵. This is incredibly dangerous, as nearly a third of Americans are wary of getting the vaccine, and posts that encourage rampant anti-vax conspiracy theories will only cause enough alarm to derail the nation's pandemic recovery. This misinformation will be amongst the first results one gets when searching up "vaccine" in the Instagram search bar, thus drowning out any good news that does occur, rendering Instagram's pop-up notice on everyone's account with a link to the CDC website fairly

useless. Although a spokesperson has said that the app is continuously trying to strengthen its systems for detection, there is more that can be done⁵. The app is capable of altering its Explore page, search results, and hashtag pages to remove at least some sort of anti-vax propaganda, but it has not yet done so. It's possible there is still much accessibility to this type of propaganda to garner the attention that will keep people engaged as sensational and polarizing content does. While there may still be anti-vax propaganda, at least in the meantime Instagram is doing its role to connect its users with local vaccination sites⁵.

Instagram is also heavily overflowed by Russian propaganda from Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA), as discovered by the American cybersecurity team New Knowledge⁶. While many assume Facebook to have the most IRA influence, there were over twice as many engagements via likes and comments on Instagram than there were on the former social media website, a difference of 187 million engagements on Instagram versus Facebook's 77 million, without a sharing option on Instagram. As the public became more aware and wary of the presence of propaganda appearing on Facebook and Twitter in 2017, the IRA decided to focus more of its efforts on its Instagram activity. After the US presidential election took place, the IRA's activity on Instagram soared by over 238% according to University of Oxford researchers⁶. This influx of Russian propaganda has gone overlooked for far too long and is now being researched more heavily to understand what should be done to avoid it.

TikTok, an app used by over 35% of children and young adults aged 10 to 19 years old, has a completely different format from the other two social media sites¹. While Facebook and Instagram are primarily promoted to keep in touch with other

people's lives while also tuning into celebrities and influencers, TikTok is based mostly on its "For You" page. This "For You" page is driven by an AI-driven algorithm that provides users with endless videos, mostly from random strangers on the internet that have the same interests as users do⁷. The many videos on the app come from the 3 billion downloads by users who watched 2.8 billion hours in just March 2020 alone⁸. The app offers an easy way to watch and create videos that are accessible to its young audience -- most videos are less than 3 minutes long. However, this does not exclude the app from propaganda efforts. TikTok, a Chinese-owned app, states that it removes 91.3% of videos that infringe its guidelines even before a user report, and this is due to Chinese computer vision technology, proving that its coding is largely based in the country⁸. This has been the cause for much alarm that resulted in an ill attempt by the United States government to ban the app for its American users in fear of Chinese propaganda. The Chinese Communist Party has easy access to the workings of TikTok and can just as easily push disinformation to create conflict, according to a former Pentagon intelligence analyst⁷. Young, impressionable audiences will have no choice but to be fed this propaganda, and eventually become addicted to it, as the algorithm will slightly tweak it to provide them with what they do and do not like. TikTok has also censored content in the past by never recommending videos with information about issues like the Hong Kong protests or the Uighur Muslim concentration camps, showing that the website is not partial and can influence the news that the youth has access to.

Due to China's cybersecurity laws, there is no doubt that the Chinese government has access to the data TikTok gathers from its users. TikTok's interim CEO states that the Chinese government has not requested the

data from its U.S. base but in reality, China does not have to request the information because they already have it⁷. While the information that is being taken by TikTok may seem harmless, it can be used to get a picture of Americans the Chinese government seeks to target by allowing them to create profiles of those they are interested in. The broader concern by many officials is the possibility of Chinese technology companies successfully thriving in the United States market, thus having a straightforward way to spread its influence on an American audience.

The younger audience of TikTok is left vulnerable to propaganda efforts made not only by China but by American political campaigns and advertisements as well. TikTok is a platform in which anyone can go viral at any moment, allowing the creation of a huge celebrity influence as well as small-scale influencers overnight. Similar to Instagram, these influencers can sway their audience to buy certain products or accept certain ideas. The main difference between this and Instagram, however, is that a majority of TikTok's users are underage and are easily impressionable by these influencers they look up to⁸. On TikTok, trends come and go within a few days, so the ability to go viral is always at one's fingertips. This leaves the younger users who have not yet had their chance at virality following those who have. While the older adults on Instagram and Facebook can sometimes detect falsehood from truth, that is often not the case for the younger users on TikTok who do not always have parental supervision.

Overall, when comparing the different types of propaganda prevalent across all three age-different social media platforms, there are comparisons and contrasts to be made. While Facebook has an older audience, its main issue with propaganda is the sharing of false

information and users being put into lists by campaigns, including Russian political influences. Instagram, used amongst Millennials, has a similar issue, but it is done by the use of Instagram Stories, hashtags, and influencers with followers who care about what they have to say. TikTok, a social media used on young audiences, is similar to Instagram regarding influencers, but unlike the other two social media platforms, the propaganda is in video format and is more readily available no matter where one is, as most of the videos viewed come from the "For You" algorithm. Instagram tends to have the most overlap among both social media platforms, maybe because its users are close in age with both other groups. The future can only tell what the next big social media platform will be and what age group will take the biggest liking towards it. It will be interesting if the findings from these social media platforms and age groups can also be applied to other social media platforms and the age groups of the users who are prevalent there as well.

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