

What Sephora Kids teach us about the pull and perils of social media trends

Is it a pretty picture when beauty influencers are 10-year-olds?



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What does high-end beauty brand Drunk Elephant have to do with big data, algorithms and critical literacy?

Unpacking the social media hashtag #GRWM that stands for Get Ready With Me will shed some light.

Used to tag user-generated videos on platforms like TikTok, Instagram and YouTube, "Get Ready With Me" content typically features young women sharing their beauty and fashion routines, walking viewers through their make-up and outfit choices and explaining their approach to presenting their best selves.

Some of these videos can be instructive, advising viewers on how to dress for their body shapes and make economically sound and environmentally sustainable fashion choices. Others can be highly consumerist, promoting the purchase of the trendiest clothes and the latest cosmetics.

Here's how Drunk Elephant enters the picture. The Shiseido-owned company has become one of beauty retailer Sephora's fastest-growing brands. It is also a "star" in the widely debated "Sephora Kids" trend on social media, a phenomenon that reveals how young people can be susceptible to the influence of social media trends and why this should be a concern.

Not unlike videos by adult influencers, the "Sephora Kids" version on TikTok and other platforms shows young girls – some barely 10 years old – rushing to the shelves of Sephora, displaying their hauls of pricey skincare brands such as Drunk Elephant, Glow Recipe and Summer Fridays, and sharing elaborate multi-step beauty rituals.

Sephora employees have separately taken to sharing on TikTok personal accounts of youngsters entering the store, causing damage to premium product samples, and verbally abusing staff members when products are unavailable.

Bratty behaviour aside, the wisdom behind these young shoppers' expensive consumerist yearnings must also be questioned. Tween social media influencers who have touted these products in their Get Ready With Me videos have likely helped stoke demand and induce



The young are vulnerable to the pressures of consumerism. Parents and educators can instil in children critical literacy by explaining that influencers probably receive incentives to extol the virtues of products, and that when they "like" social media posts, algorithms are likely to recommend more of the same. PHOTO: NYTIMES

desires that are quite misplaced.

Besides their high price tags, these products are formulated for adults and frequently contain potent active ingredients such as retinol and glycolic acid that are either unnecessary or too harsh for young skin. Dermatologists active on social media have weighed in with disapproval, noting that some adolescent patients riding the Sephora Kids trend had ended up with rashes and inflamed skin as a result of using high-strength exfoliating acids meant for adults.

Mr Michael Stora, a psychoanalyst specialising in online behaviour, told AFP news agency that the girls in the videos are "not playing with dolls as you might expect at their age – they are the dolls".

Some parents have pushed back against the criticism, rationalising that it is in fact healthy for young people to take an interest in skincare, just as they should physical fitness or mental well-being. Others have remarked that children have long been curious about what parents do, and that young girls experimenting with their mothers' make-up, clothing and

jewellery is an age-old phenomenon that should cause no alarm.

PRESSURES ON YOUNG CONSUMERS

Except that alarm may be justified since growing up in a digitally connected and artificial intelligence-fuelled world does present unprecedented challenges. In the first instance, young people today are consumers in their own right, targeted by overt and covert marketing through digital platforms and increasingly customised content.

As they go online to interact with peers and keep themselves informed via different online platforms, their interests, preferences and online activity are being systematically tracked, with such data distilled for algorithmically driven content recommendations and targeted advertising on apps, games, websites and social media.

The Sephora Kids trend has underscored the realisation that young people are extremely vulnerable to the pressures of consumerism and the

bombardment of marketing messages.

The promotion of beauty products to young people can complicate social comparison and exacerbate issues related to self-esteem and body image. Teen influencers whose appearances are enhanced by filters or cosmetics that they peddle may stoke in their audiences feelings of inadequacy, envy and even covetousness.

Content such as Get Ready With Me posts may also serve to promote unrealistic beauty standards and, in some cases, the sexualisation of teens that could lead to negative impacts on their self-esteem, body image and overall well-being.

Young people may feel pressure to conform to these beauty standards, leading to anxiety, depression and other mental health issues if they perceive that they do not measure up. Additionally, the trend could contribute to the early onset of consumerism and materialism, potentially leading to financial issues later in life if they buckle under social norms of acquiring and possessing material goods.

In the wake of the social media

storm, Drunk Elephant released an Instagram post in December 2023 titled "Can kids & tweens use Drunk Elephant?". The post stated that "Yes! Many of our products are designed for all skin, including kids and tweens". But it also cautioned against teens' use of "more potent products that include acids and retinols – their skin does not need these ingredients quite yet".

Although the warning was welcome, Drunk Elephant's equivocal message betrayed its desire to cultivate a new and eager generation of consumers.

LIFTING THE VEIL ON HIDDEN PERSUADERS

This is where parents and educators can play the valuable role of instilling in children critical literacy: Explain to them that influencers, however genuine they seem, probably receive incentives to extol the virtues of certain products; highlight to them that when they "like" social media posts of a certain genre or with particular hashtags, algorithms are likely to recommend more of the same. It may thus appear as if a particular

trend is very intense, when the algorithm is simply responding to their online content-consumption patterns.

Relatedly, data on their online activity collected by different platforms is used to build consumer profiles that are sold to advertisers. Hence, after watching Get Ready With Me or Outfit of the Day videos, they are likely to be targeted with advertisements of products featured in them.

Parents and educators can also impress upon their children or students that social media trends are fleeting and, even if they do not encourage dangerous stunts or risky behaviour, they can be insidious in other ways, such as by inducing consumerist wants.

Policymakers also need to work with social media platforms to ensure that they demonstrate responsibility towards younger audiences.

In July 2023, Singapore's Infocomm and Media Development Authority introduced a Code of Practice for Online Safety to enhance online safety, especially for children. The code requires designated social media services – currently, Facebook, HardwareZone, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter (now called X) and YouTube – to curb the spread of harmful content that is sexual, violent, endangers public health, or that relates to cyber bullying, suicide or self-harm.

For consumerist content targeted at young people, we can take guidance from the Advertising Standards Authority's (ASA) Singapore Code of Advertising Practice. It recommends that ads targeted at children should not make them "feel inferior or unpopular for not buying the advertised product". Neither should they "make a direct appeal to children to purchase unless the product is one that would be likely to interest children and that they could reasonably afford".

In the case of social media content originating from Singapore such as that produced by influencers, ASA guidelines also stipulate disclosures of sponsorships and product placements. Consumers of all ages must be taught to recognise such disclosures and to understand their meaning and intent. They should also be forewarned that not all content creators fully honour these ethical guidelines.

Ultimately, though, given the Internet's porous nature, young people in Singapore would still be exposed to vast quantities of unregulated social media content from other countries. It is therefore vital that we shore up their critical and digital literacy so that they can exercise agency and circumspection when they consume online content.

An awareness of the commercially oriented nature of online platforms and the algorithms driving content recommendations and ads is the best safeguard against undue influence.

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