Protect mental health by regulating social media ads

July 10, 2021 @ 12:50am

State of depression. -NSTP/ MOHAMAD SHAHRIL BADRI SAALI

LETTERS: Social media platforms have been instrumental for virtual connection as they have become more relevant since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

They have fostered connections and complement access to remote learning and through webinars. Despite its benefits, the other side of social media is its negative impact on the mental health of people.

A significant area that has affected the mental health of social media users is body negativity, such as weight loss advertisements or posts, which have far-reaching consequences on people. Online influencers peddle these on social media platforms, such as TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram.

Is there a scope for self-regulation and government regulation to protect the mental health of social media users?

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Does Malaysia need a "Photoshop Law" or ethics code for graphic designers? In a first by a major social media platform, Pinterest banned weight-loss advertisements in its policy following the guidance of the United States' National Eating Disorders Association.

According to Pinterest policy head Sarah Bromma, "a lot of people are facing challenges related to body image and mental health, particularly as we're emerging from Covid-19 restrictions".

Data from social media management platform Hootsuite shows that the audience base for Pinterest advertisements is mainly women between the ages of 25 and 34. The statistics on mental health and suicide is alarming, although no data exists on gender and body image-related suicide. Eating disorder is a result of weight-loss advertisements and unwholesome claims.

Government marketing regulations, such as under our Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (Act 588), have proven difficult to enforce ethical practices on social media websites due to their opaque nature. Pinterest's move is a self-regulatory measure that appears enforceable immediately across the world.

The Communication and Multimedia Content Forum of Malaysia has proposed crucial amendments to the "Content Code" focusing on advertising slimming products in Malaysia and the validation requirements from the Malaysian Medicine Advertisement Board.

Any advertisement which violates the code could be reported to the board and may incur a RM50,000 fine, a written reproval and/or approval. These measures in paragraph 8.1 of the Content Code apply to medical products registered in Malaysia.

Behind slimming and weight loss products are retouched photos which are often deceptive with body loss goals. The extent of the code on "before and after" pictures posted on social media platforms is limited as the domestic regulation apply to product and not necessarily altered or retouched photos.

The latest amendment to Norway's Marketing Control Act has imposed disclosure requirements on social media influencers, who are the mainstay of altered, edited and retouched images.

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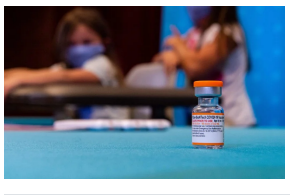

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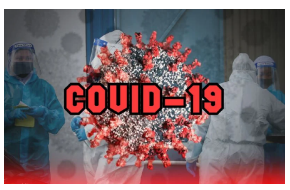

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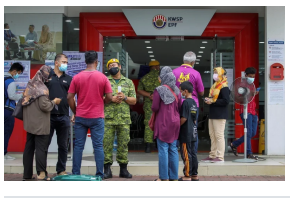

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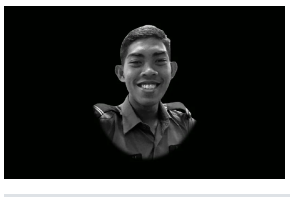

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imprisonment. The law, yet to be enforced, awaits the announcement of the king of Norway. Influencers are reportedly jittery over the matter. Other countries that have passed or are considering similar "Photoshop Laws" include the United Kingdom, France and Israel.

These regulations can promote body positivity and the mental health of citizens in a fast-changing world. Labelling online photos as edited or retouched could be the future of user interface and experience ethics for graphic designers dealing with body image.

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