

Psychology in Health and Social Care (LCHS4010_LON)



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The impact of social media on mental health in adolescence

Introduction

Adolescents' daily life now revolves around social media, which offers chances for peer relationships, communication, social interaction, and self-expression. Adolescence is a crucial developmental stage marked by considerable emotional, cognitive, and social changes that help people become more independent and forge a stronger sense of self. As a result, social experiences could have significant effects on psychological health. Numerous facets of teenage mental health, such as anxiety, depression symptoms, loneliness, body image issues, sleep issues, and decreased wellbeing, have been linked to social media use, according to research (Valkenburg, Meier, and Beyens, 2022). However, research indicates that the impact of social media use on mental health varies depending on the type of online activity, personal traits, and social context, making the relationship complicated. Positive experiences like connections, social support, and chances to explore one's identity can also be found on social media. As a result, it's critical to refrain from considering social media to have an intrinsically negative impact. Using Bowlby's Attachment Theory and Erikson's Psychosocial Theory, this essay will critically examine how social media affects teenage mental health. While Erikson's theory will take into account the significance of social media in identity development during adolescence, Bowlby's theory will be utilized to investigate how attachment and emotional security may affect teenagers' reactions to online social interactions.

Main Body

Due to the growing integration of digital communication into young people's social lives, the relationship between social media and adolescent mental health has drawn a lot of attention. Although the degree and direction of these associations varies, research suggests that social media use may be linked to detrimental psychological effects. According to Valkenburg, Meier, and Beyens' (2022) comprehensive study, the majority of reviews characterised the connection between teenage mental health and social media use as weak or inconsistent. This research is significant because it casts doubt on the notion that using social media directly contributes to mental health issues. Rather, the

psychological effect is probably going to rely on things like the kind of information that is encountered, the reason for using it, and the characteristics of the specific adolescent. The issue related to social media use is anxiety. According to a systematic review by Fassi et al. (2025), which looked at 32 studies, 56.3% of them revealed a positive correlation between social media use and anxiety. However, social media shouldn't be solely seen as a threat to mental health. Teenagers can find communities based on common interests or experiences, communicate with peers, and maintain friendships through online platforms. Thus, social media can help foster a sense of community and social support. According to the information that is now available, the impact of social media depends not only on whether or not teenagers utilize these platforms, but also on how and why they do so (Valkenburg, Meier, and Beyens, 2022). A helpful foundation for comprehending why Adolescents could react differently to social media encounters is provided by Bowlby's Attachment Theory. According to Bowlby's (1969) theory, newborns have emotional attachments to their primary carers, and the nature of these early ties affects the social and emotional development that follows. Children form internal working models about themselves and others through their encounters with carers. Expectations regarding the reliability, availability, and responsiveness of others are influenced by these models.

Several forms of attachment, including secure and insecure attachment, were later described by Ainsworth et al. (1978). When carers are continuously responsive and offer a suitable balance between possibilities for exploration and protection, secure attachment develops. On the other hand, caregiving that is inconsistent, unavailable, or indifferent to the child's needs may result in insecure attachment. Attachment theory has since been extended to relationships across the lifespan, including adolescence, despite Bowlby's initial research predominantly focusing on early childhood. Because peer interactions grow more significant during puberty, attachment is more crucial. Secure parental attachment was linked to better peer relationships involving communication, support, intimacy, and trust, according to a systematic analysis by Delgado et al. (2022) that looked at 19 studies. This implies that how teenagers form and sustain connections with others may be influenced by the emotional stability created within familial relationships.

Social media can be viewed from this angle. Teens that have a secure attachment style might be more self-assured in their relationships and less reliant on internet reviews. An adolescent who receives a critical remark on social media, for instance, could be able to ask for help from parents or close friends and understand that the online exchange does not define their real worth. Therefore, secure attachment may offer a protective base that

helps teenagers deal with unpleasant internet experiences more skilfully. Adolescents with insecure attachment, on the other hand, might be more receptive to rejection and turn to social connections for comfort. Instantaneous signs of social approval can be found on social media, such as likes, comments, follows, and message replies. Therefore, an adolescent who is worried about being rejected can give these signs a lot of weight. Feelings of anxiety, loneliness, or low self-worth may increase if an online engagement is regarded as rejection due to a lack of response or perceived exclusion. Attachment theory does not, however, imply that an adolescent's mental health outcome is determined by their attachment style. Numerous elements, such as personality, peer groups, familial relationships, and broader socioeconomic situations, have an impact on social media behaviour. Additionally, Bowlby's theory was created prior to the development of digital communication, thus its applicability to social media necessitates current study to determine how conventional attachment mechanisms function in online settings. However, research on attachment and peer connections supports taking emotional stability into account when analysing teenage reactions to social media (Delgado et al., 2022).

An additional explanation for the connection between teenage mental health and social media is offered by Erikson's Psychosocial Theory. According to Erikson's (1968) theory, there are eight phases of psychological development, and adolescence is marked by a conflict between identity and role uncertainty. In order to develop a cohesive sense of identity, young individuals investigate their values, beliefs, relationships, and future goals throughout this phase. While challenges might lead to doubt and role confusion, the resolution of this conflict promotes a stable sense of self. Erikson's theory is especially pertinent to social media because it gives teenagers a public, participatory space to develop their identities. Adolescents are free to experiment with their hobbies, opinions, relationships, social groups, and ways of presenting themselves. Peers may also provide them with feedback on how these facets of identity are viewed. In this way, social media can aid in the formation of an identity by offering chances for introspection and self-expression.

The connection between teenage identity formation and social media is supported by recent research. A systematic review of 32 studies involving 19,658 teenagers was carried out by Avci, Baams, and Kretschmer (2025). These results show that social media can have both good and negative effects from an Eriksonian standpoint. Adolescents who have positive internet experiences may be able to explore various facets of their identities and find communities where they feel accepted. An adolescent who feels alone in their

immediate surroundings, for instance, might utilise social media to connect with people who have similar experiences or interests. This could promote the growth of a more cohesive identity and bolster sentiments of belonging.

Furthermore, genuine self-expression may clash with the need to create an idealised online persona. Teenagers may feel pressured to project a certain image of themselves in order to win their classmates' acceptance. According to Erikson, developing an internally cohesive identity may be hampered by an over-reliance on external validation. Adolescents may grow more preoccupied with what they think other people want them to be rather than discovering who they are. The results of Avci, Baams, and Kretschmer (2025) are pertinent in this context since social comparison was linked to identity anxiety, while authenticity was linked to increased self-concept clarity. Therefore, social media may be more important during adolescence, which is explained by Erikson's hypothesis. Social acceptance, rejection, and comparison can have significant psychological effects since identity development is a crucial developmental job during this time. However, as Erikson's thesis was created prior to the rise of social media, it does not particularly take into consideration the technological aspects of modern platforms. Therefore, rather than serving as a comprehensive explanation of online activity, it should be used in conjunction with current empirical studies.

The theories of Bowlby and Erikson offer complementary explanations for the possible effects of social media on the mental health of adolescents. Erikson's theory concentrates on identity development and psychosocial adjustment, while Bowlby's theory promotes attachment, emotional stability, and relationships. Because supportive relationships may offer the security needed for successful identity discovery, these processes may interact during adolescence. An adolescent with solid attachment, for instance, could feel more comfortable asking parents and peers for help while they're having trouble online. This emotional stability could lessen reliance on social media acceptance and lay the groundwork for more genuine identity exploration. On the other hand, an adolescent with attachment insecurity can be more vulnerable to rejection online and more reliant on approval from others. This could make it more likely that unpleasant social media encounters will impede identity formation and psychological health.

Conclusion

In conclusion, teenage mental health can be impacted by social media in both positive

and negative ways. While excessive use, social comparison, cyberbullying, and peer pressure can all lead to anxiety, low self-esteem, and psychological suffering, it can also foster communication, social support, belonging, and identity development. According to Bowlby's Attachment Theory, teenagers with secure attachments would be better able to handle unpleasant online encounters because they have supportive relationships, while those with insecure attachments might be more sensitive to rejection and dependent on approval from others. Adolescence is a crucial time for identity development, according to Erikson's psychosocial theory. Identity exploration can be aided by social media, but identity confusion and distress may result from comparison with idealised online personas. In general, not all teenagers are equally impacted by social media because its effects vary depending on connections, personal growth, and online activity patterns.

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