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The Impact of Social Media on Mental Health in Adolescence

Introduction

Adolescence represents a significant stage of human development, marked by major physical, emotional, cognitive, and social changes. During this period, young people begin to form a stronger sense of identity, seek greater independence from their families, and place increasing importance on friendships and peer acceptance. As technology has become an integral part of daily life, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and WhatsApp now play a central role in how many adolescents communicate, interact, and express themselves.

Although these platforms provide opportunities to maintain relationships, share experiences, and explore personal interests, growing evidence suggests that they may also contribute to a range of mental health concerns. High levels of social media use have been associated with increased anxiety, depressive symptoms, lower self-esteem, and difficulties managing emotions (Keles et al., 2020). Adolescents may be especially susceptible to these effects because they are still developing emotionally and psychologically. Developmental theories provide useful insight into why social media can have such a powerful influence during this stage of life. This essay examines the relationship between social media use and adolescent mental health by applying Erikson's psychosocial theory and Bowlby's attachment theory, showing how both perspectives help explain the potential advantages as well as the psychological risks associated with online engagement.

Social media affects adolescent mental wellbeing in a variety of ways. One important concern is its connection with anxiety and depression. Research indicates that spending significant amounts of time on platforms that encourage appearance-based content and social comparison can increase feelings of dissatisfaction with oneself and contribute to depressive symptoms (Fardouly et al., 2015). Many young people are regularly exposed to carefully edited images and highlights of others' lives, making it easy to compare themselves with unrealistic standards. As a result, they may feel inadequate, less confident, or under pressure to achieve similar lifestyles or appearances.

Another major issue is cyberbullying, which has become increasingly common as online communication has expanded. Negative experiences such as harassment, exclusion, or abusive comments on social media can have serious emotional consequences, increasing stress and psychological distress among adolescents (Nixon, 2014). Furthermore, because social media is available almost constantly through smartphones and other devices, many young people find it difficult to disconnect. The ongoing need to check notifications, respond to messages, or monitor peer feedback may interfere with sleep, increase emotional fatigue, and make it harder to maintain healthy psychological wellbeing.

These concerns highlight the close relationship between the online environment and the developmental challenges that adolescents experience as they mature.

Erikson's psychosocial theory provides a valuable perspective for understanding why social media can have such a strong influence during adolescence. Erikson (1968) proposed that this stage of development centres on the conflict between identity and role confusion. During this period, young people work towards developing a stable understanding of who they are, while exploring their values, beliefs, and future roles. Social media offers a digital space where adolescents can express themselves, experiment with different aspects of their identity, and receive feedback from friends and wider online communities. When these interactions are encouraging and supportive, they can strengthen confidence and contribute positively to identity development.

However, Erikson also argued that forming an identity is a sensitive and uncertain process. Negative online experiences, including criticism, rejection, or exclusion, can undermine adolescents' confidence and leave them questioning their self-worth. Social media may intensify these challenges because it encourages continuous comparison and public evaluation through features such as likes, comments, shares, and follower numbers. If adolescents begin to judge their value primarily through these forms of online feedback, they may become increasingly dependent on external approval. This reliance can contribute to greater levels of anxiety, insecurity, and reduced self-esteem.

Erikson's theory also stresses that relationships with peers become increasingly important throughout adolescence. Feeling accepted by friendship groups often plays a significant role in healthy psychological development. Social media can increase this pressure by creating an environment where popularity and social approval appear highly visible. As a result, many adolescents feel the need to present carefully managed versions of themselves that they believe others will find attractive or acceptable. Over time, maintaining this idealised online image may create a disconnect between their authentic identity and the version they display online, leading to emotional strain and feelings of dissatisfaction.

Evidence supports this developmental perspective. Research has shown that adolescents who regularly compare themselves with others on social networking platforms are more likely to experience depressive symptoms and poorer psychological wellbeing (Vogel et al., 2014). This finding is consistent with Erikson's argument that identity formation is strongly influenced by social experiences and feedback from others. Consequently, while social media can provide valuable opportunities for self-expression and identity exploration, it can also create conditions that increase psychological vulnerability during this important stage of development.

Bowlby's attachment theory provides another useful perspective for understanding the relationship between social media use and adolescent mental health. According to Bowlby (1969), the quality of a person's early relationships with caregivers plays an important role in shaping how they form relationships, regulate emotions, and respond to social situations later in life. Adolescents who have developed secure attachment patterns generally feel more confident in their relationships and are better able to cope with emotional difficulties. For these young people, social media can function as a positive tool for maintaining contact with friends and family, strengthening existing relationships, and fostering a sense of belonging. As a result, they are more likely to engage with social media in healthy and balanced ways.

The experience can be very different for adolescents with insecure attachment styles. Those who display anxious attachment often seek frequent reassurance from others and may become highly concerned about how they are viewed online. Features such as likes, comments, and reactions can reinforce this need for approval, encouraging repeated checking of social media for signs of acceptance. Over time, this pattern of behaviour may develop into excessive or compulsive use, making emotional wellbeing increasingly dependent on online interactions. Blackwell et al. (2017) found that insecure attachment is associated with more problematic patterns of social media use as well as poorer psychological outcomes. From Bowlby's perspective, these findings help explain why some adolescents are more affected than others by the demands and pressures of online social environments.

Attachment theory is also valuable when considering the psychological effects of cyberbullying. Young people with insecure attachment may be more likely to interpret negative online experiences as evidence that they are disliked or unworthy of acceptance. Consequently, incidents of cyberbullying can reinforce existing fears of rejection, increasing the likelihood of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and withdrawal from social relationships. In comparison, adolescents with secure attachment are often better able to cope with these experiences because they are more likely to seek comfort and guidance from trusted adults or supportive peers.

Bowlby also emphasised that supportive caregiving continues to influence emotional wellbeing beyond early childhood. During adolescence, parents and caregivers remain an important source of emotional security, particularly as young people learn to navigate increasingly complex digital environments. Open communication, encouragement, and consistent emotional support can help adolescents develop healthier online habits and reduce the impact of negative experiences. Evidence from Frison and Eggermont (2015) suggests that adolescents who perceive strong parental support are less likely to experience adverse mental health effects associated with social media use. These findings reinforce Bowlby's argument that secure attachment serves as an important protective factor, helping young people manage the challenges presented by social media more effectively.

Although a considerable amount of research has focused on the potential harms associated with social media, it is equally important to recognise that these platforms can have positive effects on adolescents' mental wellbeing. For many young people, social media provides a valuable way to stay connected with others, particularly for those who experience loneliness or find it difficult to build relationships in face-to-face settings. Online spaces can offer encouragement, acceptance, and opportunities to engage with individuals who share similar experiences, interests, or backgrounds. This can be especially beneficial for adolescents who are exploring important aspects of their identity, including cultural heritage, personal interests, or sexual orientation.

From Erikson's perspective, these online environments may contribute positively to identity development by allowing adolescents to explore different aspects of themselves within supportive communities. Likewise, Bowlby's attachment theory suggests that positive online relationships can strengthen, rather than replace, existing offline support networks. When digital interactions are respectful and meaningful, they may enhance feelings of security, belonging, and emotional wellbeing. Therefore, the influence of social media cannot be viewed as entirely beneficial or entirely harmful. Instead, its effects are shaped by factors

such as the way it is used, the nature of online interactions, and the individual characteristics of the adolescent.

When the ideas proposed by Erikson and Bowlby are considered together, they provide a comprehensive explanation of how social media can influence adolescent mental health. Adolescence is a period in which young people are developing their identity, placing increasing importance on peer relationships, and learning to regulate their emotions. Social media has the capacity to strengthen each of these developmental processes, but it can also magnify the challenges associated with them. Constant exposure to peer opinions, opportunities for comparison, and immediate online feedback can create additional emotional pressures during a stage when self-esteem and identity are still evolving.

The two theories also help explain why adolescents respond differently to similar online experiences. Those with insecure attachment patterns may become more reliant on digital approval and find negative comments, rejection, or cyberbullying particularly difficult to manage. In contrast, adolescents who have secure attachment relationships and strong support from family and friends are often better equipped to maintain a healthy perspective on social media. They are more likely to use these platforms to communicate, express themselves, and build positive relationships without becoming overly dependent on online validation.

Conclusion

Social media plays an increasingly influential role in the lives of adolescents and has the potential to affect their mental health in both positive and negative ways. Erikson's psychosocial theory demonstrates how the search for identity and the growing importance of peer acceptance can make young people especially responsive to the experiences they encounter online. Bowlby's attachment theory complements this understanding by showing that early relationship experiences continue to influence how adolescents interpret and respond to digital interactions, with insecure attachment increasing the likelihood of adverse psychological outcomes.

Despite the challenges associated with excessive social media use, online comparison, and cyberbullying, these platforms can also provide meaningful opportunities for connection, self-expression, and social support when used appropriately. Promoting healthy patterns of social media use, encouraging strong family relationships, and helping adolescents develop resilience and a secure sense of identity are all important strategies for reducing potential harms while maximising the benefits of digital communication. Applying developmental theories such as those proposed by Erikson and Bowlby offers a deeper understanding of why social media affects young people in different ways and provides a valuable foundation for supporting adolescents as they navigate an increasingly digital world.

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