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Social Media and Adolescent Mental Health: An Analysis Through Erikson's Psychosocial Development and Bowlby's Attachment Theory

Adolescence is a period of substantial change in identity, emotions, and relationships. During this stage, young people become increasingly concerned with how they see themselves and how they are viewed by others. Social media has become an important part of this environment, providing opportunities for communication, social connection, self-expression, and support. At the same time, concerns have increased associations between social media use and anxiety, depressive symptoms, poor body image, and sleep problems. However, the evidence does not support a simple conclusion that social media is either harmful or beneficial. Its effects appear to depend on how it is used, what young people experience online, individual vulnerabilities and the quality of existing relationships (American Psychological Association, 2023). This essay examines these issues through Erikson's psychosocial development theory and Bowlby's attachment theory, arguing that adolescent development and relationship security help explain why young people can respond differently to similar online experiences.

Depression and anxiety are among the main concerns associated with social media. Ahmed et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis involving more than one million young people and found weak but statistically significant associations between social media use and depression and anxiety. Problematic social media use was also associated with poorer wellbeing and sleep problems. However, the authors identified substantial variation between

studies and emphasized the need for longitudinal research. Ahmed et al. (2024) found an association between baseline social media use and later depression, but not evidence that depression predicted later social media use. Therefore, although social media may contribute to psychological difficulties for some young people, the relationship cannot be explained as a simple cause-and-effect process.

One possible explanation is social comparison. Adolescents can be sensitive to social evaluation, while social media provides frequent opportunities to compare appearance, relationships, popularity, and achievements with peers. Online content can also present selective images of other people's lives because users choose what to share. Orben et al. (2024) identify social comparison, self-concept, social feedback, and social exclusion as mechanisms through which social media may interact with adolescent development. This suggests that the content and context of use may matter as much as the amount of use.

The body image illustrates this process. Revranche, Biscond and Husky (2022) conducted a systematic review of 30 studies involving 31,331 participants and found an association between social networking use and negative body image among adolescents. Appearance-related content was also identified as potentially harmful to body image. These findings do not prove that social media directly causes poor body image, but they suggest that frequent exposure to appearance-focused content may contribute to dissatisfaction with appearance.

Erikson's psychosocial theory helps explain why adolescence may be especially sensitive to these experiences. Erikson (1968) identified adolescence as the stage of identity versus role confusion. During this period, young people explore values, beliefs, relationships and possible futures in an attempt to develop a coherent sense of identity. Social media can provide opportunities for this process because adolescents can experiment with self-presentation, express different aspects of themselves, and connect with people who share similar interests or experiences. Orben et al. (2024) similarly argues that social media interacts with developmental changes in self-concept and social comparison.

However, the same environment can create pressure. Likes, comments, follower counts, and other forms of social feedback make social approval highly visible. An adolescent who receives little positive feedback may interpret this as evidence that they are unpopular or inadequate, even when that interpretation is inaccurate. From an Eriksonian perspective, repeated negative social feedback could therefore complicate rather than support the development of a stable identity. Orben et al. (2024) argue that developmental changes in self-concept, social comparison, and responses to social feedback can interact with social media in ways that increase psychological vulnerability.

Cyberbullying represents another important risk. Unlike many forms of face-to-face bullying, online bullying can continue beyond school and may be visible to a much larger audience. Hurtful comments, humiliating images, and exclusion from online groups can therefore extend experiences of rejection beyond the original incident. The American Psychological Association (2023) recognises cyberbullying and harassment as potential risks to adolescent wellbeing. A meta-analysis of 42 studies involving 266,888 participants also found associations between

bullying, cyberbullying and mental health problems among children and adolescents (Zhang et al., 2022). These findings suggest that negative online social experiences can be associated with poorer psychological outcomes. From an Eriksonian perspective, online rejection may be particularly significant because peer acceptance contributes to adolescents' developing sense of identity and belonging.

Bowlby's attachment theory provides another perspective and helps explain why adolescents may respond differently to similar online experiences. Bowlby (1969) proposed that early relationships with caregivers contribute to internal working models, which influence expectations about the self and whether other people are trustworthy and available. Consistent and responsive caregiving is associated with secure attachment, while insecure attachment is associated with less confidence in the availability and reliability of others.

Research supports a connection between attachment and adolescent peer relationships. Delgado et al. (2022), in a systematic review, found that secure attachment was associated with positive peer relationships characterized by trust, communication, support, and intimacy. This is relevant to social media because online interactions occur within the context of adolescents' existing relationships. Attachment theory suggests that young people who generally expect relationships to be supportive and reliable may interpret ambiguous social experiences differently from those who are more concerned about rejection.

Social media can therefore operate as an extension of existing relationships rather than producing identical effects for everyone. An adolescent with secure relationships may use social media alongside relationships with family and friends to maintain contact and obtain support. The American Psychological Association (2023) recognizes that social media can provide companionship, social support and emotional intimacy, particularly for young people experiencing social isolation. However, these benefits should not be assumed to occur for every adolescent.

Attachment theory can also help explain why ambiguous online experiences may be interpreted differently. A delayed reply, exclusion from an online conversation or reduced social feedback may be relatively unimportant to one adolescent but experienced as rejection by another. Orben et al. (2024) highlights the importance of social feedback and social exclusion during adolescence, while attachment theory suggests that existing expectations about relationships may influence interpretation. Rather, attachment security may be one factor contributing to individual differences in responses to online social experiences. Such differences are important when considering adolescent development and mental health.

Sleep provides another pathway connecting social media use with mental health. Adolescents require sufficient sleep for healthy emotional and cognitive functioning, while social media use close to bedtime may interfere with sleep. Alonzo et al. (2021) reviewed research involving young people aged 16 to 25 and found associations between excessive social media use, poorer sleep quality, and negative mental health outcomes. Ahmed et al. (2024) similarly found that problematic social media use was associated with sleep problems. These findings suggest

that the relationship may be particularly concerning when social media use becomes problematic rather than simply when adolescents spend any amount of time online.

Despite these risks, social media also has potential benefits. Platforms can help young people maintain friendships, communicate with others, find communities and access emotional support (American Psychological Association, 2023). Social media can also provide opportunities for creativity, self-expression, and self-presentation, which can be connected to the identity development described by Erikson. Consequently, the amount of time spent online alone may be less informative than what adolescents are doing online and the quality of their experiences there (Orben et al., 2024).

There are significant limitations to existing research. Much of the evidence is observational, so causal relationships are difficult to establish. Ahmed et al. (2024) found considerable variation between studies and emphasized the need for longitudinal research. Family relationships, school pressures, and existing psychological difficulties may also influence social media use and mental health. Orben et al. (2024) therefore argue for greater attention to the mechanisms through which social media interacts with adolescent development rather than focusing only on the amount of time young people spend online. This includes considering content, social comparison, social feedback, exclusion, and self-presentation.

These findings support a cautious, balanced interpretation of the evidence rather than a simple causal explanation. For this reason, interventions should focus on helping adolescents recognize harmful content, manage social feedback, maintain relationships, and develop healthy patterns of use. Such an approach recognizes the benefits and risks of social media without assuming that screen use has the same effect.

In conclusion, social media has both potential risks and benefits for adolescent mental health. Research has identified associations with anxiety, depressive symptoms, negative body image, sleep problems and problematic use, particularly when young people experience harmful online interactions or intensive use (Ahmed et al., 2024; Revranche, Biscond and Husky, 2022). At the same time, social media can support friendship, provide emotional support and create opportunities for self-expression and identity exploration (American Psychological Association, 2023; Orben et al., 2024). Erikson's theory helps explain why adolescents may be sensitive to social evaluation because identity is still developing during this stage. Bowlby's attachment theory adds an explanation for individual differences by suggesting that existing expectations about relationships can influence how young people experience social interactions. Social media should therefore not be treated as simply good or bad. Its relationship with adolescent mental health is better understood as an interaction between developmental stage, individual vulnerability, relationship security, online experiences and patterns of use. Supporting adolescent mental health should involve healthy relationships, digital literacy, and appropriate boundaries around social media, rather than relying solely on reducing overall screen time.

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