

Discuss the Impact of Social Media on Mental Health in Adolescence

[Olawumi Bamgboye]

Student Number: [2507681]

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Lecturer: [Neale Haddon]

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Introduction

It is well known that adolescence is the stage where identity and relationships formation happen, and it is also the stage when youth spends much time interacting on social media. The almost complete penetration of these media in teenagers' lives means that this quest for identity happens mostly online nowadays (Sharma et al., 2026). In this essay, the effects of social media on mental health of adolescents are examined, taking into consideration the insights from two psychological theories: the theory of psychosocial development by Erikson and attachment theory by Bowlby. According to Erikson, adolescence is the conflict between identity and role confusion, which requires experimenting with various roles, beliefs and identities in order to reach a clear understanding of one's personality. This theory implies that social media usage intensifies this process, providing new possibilities and dangers for identity exploration. Attachment theory by Bowlby supplements this view by explaining the influence of the quality of early attachments on peers' relations and online behavior of adolescents. In this essay, firstly, the overall data on the effects of social media on adolescents' mental health are discussed, and then the insights from Erikson's and Bowlby's theories are examined in this respect.

Social Media Use and Mental Health in Adolescence

However, the relationship between social media use and psychological well-being during adolescence is complex and has been proven by much research, though not necessarily unambiguous. The results of an extensive literature review indicate that social media can serve as both a risk and protective factor, depending greatly on the type of use, the particular adolescent, and the circumstances (Sharma et al., 2026). Passive, comparison-based activities (scanning content produced by others without engaging) have been related to poor mood and body image more often than active, communication-centered social media use has (Sharma et al., 2026). The ambivalence is echoed by the findings of qualitative research conducted among adolescents themselves, who tend to view social media as an important means of establishing belongingness and exploring identity yet also express feelings of distress related to social comparison, exclusion and cyberbullying (Popat and Tarrant, 2022). In this regard, the role of peer relationships seems particularly important as systematic reviews suggest that high quality peer relationships are positively related to better adolescent identity formation although the underlying mechanisms are not fully known (Ragelienė, 2016). In other words, based on existing literature, the impact of social media on the mental wellbeing of adolescents seems tightly connected to two tasks of adolescence which are identity formation and establishment of secure interpersonal relationships. Erikson and Bowlby's theories, discussed below, can shed light on both aspects.

Theory One: Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development

The theory of psychosocial development by Erikson consists of eight phases, each characterized by its unique crisis that needs to be successfully dealt with to ensure healthy growth throughout life. The adolescent phase fits into the fifth stage known as identity vs. role confusion in which teens distance themselves from the influence of their parents' authority and seek to find their own selves through peer group socialization and different values and beliefs in the world around them (Erikson, 1968). The successful solution to this crisis requires active exploration and identification, which Erikson called the virtue of fidelity; on the contrary, an unsuccessful solution causes the youth to feel confused about their role, which can lead to various psychological problems in the future (Ragelienė, 2016).

It stands to reason that social media increases the potential of both benefits and dangers related to this stage. On the positive note, virtual worlds provide adolescents with an opportunity to try out different roles, interests, and groups they associate with, at times even anonymously or distanced from their real life social circle. This aspect might be especially helpful for adolescents trying out different identities that they do not feel safe exploring in the offline world. However, at the same time, the above-mentioned platforms make adolescents face an endless stream of self-representations made by peers that have been curating and presenting themselves through their best qualities in a rather idealized manner, thus adding the challenge of having to compare oneself to an unattainable benchmark. In cases when identity exploration is performed through gaining likes and followers, it can lead to the development of an identity that lacks integrity. Public criticism and cyber bullying might be extremely harmful to the individual at this stage because the developing sense of self becomes the target for this criticism, which could be very harmful at the time when the teenager is dependent on social feedback to understand his own personality. Erikson's stage theory, despite its popularity and widespread use, has been criticized for its impracticality in terms of testing and the assumption of a universal pattern of development that might not be applicable to modern teenagers.

Theory Two: Bowlby's Attachment Theory

According to Bowlby's theory of attachment, the relationship established between an infant and their primary caregiver creates a working model of relationships in the individual's mind – a set of expectations concerning oneself and others that guide the way he/she interacts in close relationships for the rest of one's life (Bowlby, 1969). Young people whose early experiences with caregiving were stable and responsive tend to establish the secure attachment style that is associated with high self-worth and trust in other people, whereas

those whose early experiences were inconsistent or rejecting tend to exhibit insecure attachment styles, anxious or avoidant. Although initially the theory of attachment applied exclusively to parent-child relationships, it now includes peers and romantic partners during adolescence, which marks the time when peers become crucial sources of attachment for young individuals (Ragelienė, 2016).

What makes this theory relevant here is that it introduces the relational perspective into Erikson's model, because one can expect that the secure status of peer relations in adolescents would affect their attitude towards social media. Adolescents with secure attachments, who tend to be confident and trusting in their peer relations, seem to be more ready to utilize social media for forming real friendships and for seeking support, which can account for the fact that some adolescents perceive social media primarily as a way of connecting (Popat and Tarrant, 2022). However, teenagers with an anxious attachment style, those who experience the need for closeness in combination with fear of rejection, will probably be more susceptible to developing compulsive checking behavior and reassurance seeking behavior through social media, and also will have reported problematic social media use (D'Arienzo, Boursier and Griffiths, 2019). Teenagers with an avoidant attachment style, on the other hand, might completely avoid close interaction in the online environment and become passive users of social media, comparing themselves to others through social media platforms which have already been associated with worse mood (Sharma et al., 2026). In this sense, Bowlby's theory explains the reasons behind different psychological consequences for adolescents experiencing similar online environments, since their level of security within the relationships affects both their offline friendships and social media use.

Conclusion

In this essay, the influence of social media on mental well-being in adolescents has been analyzed using Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and Bowlby's attachment theory. The main point of Erikson's theory is that social media have an effect on the psychosocial task of developing one's own identity. On the one hand, social media provides the environment for identity exploration, while, on the other hand, when identity is based on the need for validation from others, it is weak and confused. As for the attachment theory, it complements the above idea since this theory is based on the idea that there are certain relational elements that adolescents bring to social media interactions. Together, the two theories provide evidence that the effect of social media on the well-being of adolescents is neither uniform nor linear but dependent on the level of adolescent's development of identity and security of his or her attachments. This way, the complex and very individual results of numerous studies can be explained. At the same time, both theories have flaws. For

example, the stage theory of Erikson is difficult to prove because it does not allow studying the process of identity formation itself, especially through digital communication, and is based on some simplification of the problem. The second theory by Bowlby is proved by empirical studies but requires longitudinal studies that could show how attachment style and social media use correlate during the period of development. It follows that the work with adolescents requires not only limitation of their screen time but the creation of a safe environment for developing identity and healthy relationships.

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