

LCHS4010 Component 2 Essay

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Discuss the impact of social media on mental health in adolescence

Social media has become a central part of everyday life for adolescents, changing the way young people communicate, build relationships and express themselves. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and YouTube enable teenagers to stay connected with friends, share experiences and access information instantly. Recent evidence suggests that approximately 95% of teenagers have access to a smartphone, while almost all adolescents use at least one social media platform regularly (Pew Research Center, 2023). Although social media provides opportunities for social interaction, creativity and emotional support, increasing concern has been raised about its potential effects on mental health. Research has linked excessive social media use with increased levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, poor body image and reduced self-esteem, particularly during adolescence when identity and emotional wellbeing are still developing. At the same time, social media can also provide positive experiences by allowing young people to access support networks, educational content and communities that promote inclusion and belonging.

Adolescence is a significant stage of human development, typically occurring between the ages of 10 and 19 years, during which individuals experience rapid physical, emotional, cognitive and social changes. Mental health during this period is especially important because emotional experiences and relationships formed in adolescence can have long-term effects on wellbeing throughout adulthood. Understanding how social media influences adolescent mental health has therefore become an important issue for psychologists, educators and healthcare professionals.

This essay will discuss the impact of social media on adolescent mental health by applying two psychological theories: Bowlby's Attachment Theory and Bandura's Social Learning Theory. It will first explain the main principles of each theory before applying them to adolescent social media use. The essay will then critically evaluate the strengths and limitations of both theories in explaining the relationship between social media and mental health before concluding which theory provides the most useful understanding of this contemporary issue.

John Bowlby (1969) developed Attachment Theory to explain the importance of the emotional bond formed between an infant and their primary caregiver. Bowlby argued that children are biologically programmed to seek closeness to a caregiver because this attachment increases their chances of survival and provides a secure base from which they can explore the world. The quality of this early attachment plays a significant role in shaping an individual's emotional, social and psychological development throughout life. According to

Bowlby, when caregivers respond consistently and sensitively to a child's needs, the child is more likely to develop a secure attachment. In contrast, inconsistent, neglectful or unavailable caregiving may result in insecure attachment styles, including anxious, avoidant or disorganised attachment.

A key concept within Bowlby's theory is the internal working model, which refers to the mental framework children develop based on their early relationships. This model influences how individuals perceive themselves, others and future relationships. Adolescents with secure attachment styles are generally more confident, emotionally resilient and able to develop healthy social relationships. Those with insecure attachment may experience difficulties regulating emotions, fear rejection and seek reassurance from others. These ideas remain highly relevant when exploring adolescent development because relationships continue to play an important role during the teenage years. As young people increasingly interact through social media, Bowlby's theory provides a useful framework for understanding how attachment patterns may influence online behaviour and psychological wellbeing.

Bowlby's Attachment Theory can help explain why many adolescents are drawn to social media and why their online experiences can have a significant impact on their mental health. During adolescence, relationships become increasingly important as young people seek acceptance, belonging and emotional support from others. Teenagers with secure attachment styles may use social media as a positive tool to strengthen existing friendships, maintain social connections and access supportive online communities. These positive interactions can promote feelings of belonging, improve self-esteem and reduce feelings of loneliness, particularly for adolescents who may struggle to find support in their offline environments.

In contrast, adolescents with insecure attachment styles may rely heavily on social media for reassurance and validation. For example, they may become overly concerned with the number of 'likes', comments or followers they receive, using this feedback to measure their self-worth. When this validation is not received, feelings of rejection, anxiety and low self-esteem may increase. Research has shown that excessive reassurance-seeking and fear of missing out (FOMO) are associated with higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms among adolescents who frequently use social media.

A practical example can be seen in teenagers who constantly compare themselves with influencers or peers posting idealised images online. These comparisons may reinforce negative beliefs about appearance, popularity or success, particularly for individuals with

insecure attachment patterns. However, Bowlby's theory also suggests that social media is not inherently harmful. When used in healthy ways and alongside strong offline relationships, it can strengthen social support, encourage communication and provide emotional comfort during challenging periods. Therefore, the impact of social media largely depends on the quality of an adolescent's existing attachment relationships and their ability to regulate emotions in response to online experiences.

Bowlby's Attachment Theory provides a valuable explanation of how early relationships can influence adolescents' emotional responses to social media. One of its main strengths is that it highlights the importance of secure emotional bonds in promoting resilience, self-esteem and healthy coping strategies. This helps explain why some adolescents use social media in a balanced and positive way, while others become overly dependent on online validation and experience greater emotional distress. The theory is also supported by research showing that secure attachment is associated with better mental health outcomes and stronger interpersonal relationships throughout adolescence.

Despite these strengths, the theory has several limitations. Bowlby placed considerable emphasis on early childhood experiences, which may underestimate the influence of later life experiences, friendships, family changes and wider social factors. Adolescents are influenced by many variables beyond attachment, including peer pressure, personality, culture and the design of social media platforms themselves. In addition, not all teenagers with insecure attachment experience poor mental health or problematic social media use, suggesting that attachment alone cannot fully explain individual differences. Therefore, while Bowlby's theory offers an important foundation for understanding adolescent behaviour online, it is most effective when considered alongside other psychological theories that recognise the role of observation, learning and environmental influences.

Albert Bandura (1977) developed Social Learning Theory to explain how individuals learn behaviours, attitudes and beliefs through observing and imitating others. Unlike behaviourist theories, which focus mainly on direct reinforcement and punishment, Bandura argued that people can learn simply by watching the behaviour of role models and observing the consequences of their actions. This process is known as observational learning or modelling. According to Bandura, learning involves four key processes: attention, where an individual notices a behaviour; retention, where the behaviour is remembered; reproduction, where the individual is capable of copying the behaviour; and motivation, where there is a reason or reward for performing the behaviour. Reinforcement can be direct, indirect or vicarious,

meaning that individuals are influenced by seeing others rewarded or criticised for their actions.

Social Learning Theory is particularly relevant to adolescence because teenagers are highly influenced by peers, celebrities, influencers and online personalities. During this stage of development, adolescents are actively forming their identities and are more likely to compare themselves with others while seeking acceptance and approval. As social media exposes young people to a constant stream of images, opinions and behaviours, Bandura's theory provides a useful framework for understanding how online interactions can shape beliefs, attitudes and mental health. The theory emphasises that behaviour is influenced not only by personal factors but also by the social environment, making it especially applicable to today's digital world.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory can be clearly applied to understand how adolescents are influenced by social media content and how this may impact their mental health. Social media platforms expose young people to a wide range of role models, including influencers, celebrities and peers, whose behaviours, lifestyles and appearances are constantly visible. Through observational learning, adolescents may imitate behaviours they see being rewarded online, such as receiving likes, comments and followers. This reinforcement can encourage teenagers to copy certain behaviours, fashion styles or lifestyle choices in order to gain similar social approval.

A key issue is that much of the content presented on social media is highly curated and idealised. Influencers often display unrealistic body images, luxury lifestyles and constant positivity. According to Bandura's concept of vicarious reinforcement, adolescents may observe these individuals being rewarded with attention and admiration, which can encourage comparison and imitation. This can negatively affect mental health by increasing body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy when teenagers compare their real lives to these idealised online representations.

However, Social Learning Theory also highlights positive influences. Adolescents can learn beneficial behaviours through social media, such as mental health awareness, fitness routines, study motivation or coping strategies shared by supportive communities (NHS, 2025). For example, online campaigns promoting body positivity or mental health awareness can model healthy attitudes and reduce stigma. Therefore, the impact of social media depends on the types of behaviours being observed and reinforced, as well as the adolescent's ability to critically interpret online content rather than passively imitate it.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory is highly useful for understanding adolescent behaviour in the context of social media because it explains how individuals are influenced by observing others within their social environment. A key strength of the theory is its emphasis on the role of modelling and reinforcement, which clearly applies to modern social media platforms where likes, shares and comments act as powerful forms of social reward. It also provides a strong explanation for why adolescents may adopt behaviours, attitudes and appearance ideals seen online, particularly during a developmental stage where identity formation and peer acceptance are highly important.

However, the theory also has limitations. One criticism is that it can underestimate the role of individual differences in cognition and emotional processing. Not all adolescents exposed to the same social media content are equally influenced, suggesting that personal resilience, critical thinking skills and existing mental health conditions play an important role. In addition, Social Learning Theory does not fully explain why some individuals actively resist or reject social media influences, even when exposed to strong models and reinforcement. The theory is also limited in its ability to account for biological or emotional factors, such as anxiety disorders or self-esteem issues that may exist independently of social learning processes. Despite these limitations, Bandura's theory remains highly relevant for understanding how social media can shape adolescent behaviour and mental health. It is most effective when used alongside other psychological explanations, such as attachment theory, which accounts for emotional development and early relational experiences.

In conclusion, this essay has explored the impact of social media on adolescent mental health through the application of Bowlby's Attachment Theory and Bandura's Social Learning Theory. It has been shown that social media can have both positive and negative effects on mental wellbeing. From an attachment perspective, adolescents' early emotional bonds influence how they seek validation and respond to online feedback, which can contribute to either emotional resilience or vulnerability to anxiety and low self-esteem. From a social learning perspective, adolescents are also shaped by observing and imitating behaviours, attitudes and lifestyles displayed on social media, which can lead to both harmful social comparisons and positive learning opportunities. Overall, both theories demonstrate that social media is not inherently harmful but instead interacts with individual psychological and social factors to influence mental health outcomes. However, Bandura's Social Learning Theory provides a slightly more comprehensive explanation in the context of modern social media, as it directly accounts for the role of online models, reinforcement mechanisms and environmental influence. Despite this, the strongest understanding of adolescent mental health is achieved when both theories are combined, as attachment

processes and social learning together offer a more complete explanation of how young people are affected by social media in today's digital world.

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