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Assessment 2

**The Impact of Social Media on Mental Health
in Adolescence**

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is widely seen as a decisive stage in human development. In this period, young people figure out who they are, how they fit in with others, and what's important to you. And these days, all of this is happening against a backdrop of social media, which is everywhere. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube are where many teenagers spend a lot of their time, chatting with friends, expressing themselves, and just generally navigating the world. Social media can be a great thing as it can be a place where you can be creative, connect with others, and learn new stuff. But there's also a lot of evidence to suggest that it can harm mental health, especially for young people. Studies have linked high levels of social media engagement with increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and body dissatisfaction (Royal Society for Public Health, 2017). This essay, therefore, draws on Erikson's psychosocial development theory and Bowlby's attachment theory to examine how social media exposure may affect adolescent mental health. These theories give us a framework for thinking about how teenagers form their identities, how they relate to others, and how they navigate the digital world. By looking at social media through this lens, we can start to understand why it's having such a big impact on their lives.

MAIN BODY

One of the most noticeable psychological pressures linked with social media use is the bias for social comparison. Digital platforms inspire users to share flawless images of their lives, often through carefully edited images and videos. Many adolescents are influenced by what they perceive to be others' idealised lives online, believing that others are as successful, as happy, or as popular as they present themselves to be. However, the reality is opposite and often causes feelings of sadness or depression. Research conducted by Kelly et al. (2018) found that adolescent girls who frequently compare themselves to others online experience a decline in self-esteem. Erikson's theory of the adolescent identity crisis provides insight to the potential negative effects that social media can have on an adolescent's development of identity. Erikson's (1968) theory describes the conflict between identity vs. role confusion as the primary struggle of adolescence. During this stage of life, adolescents are trying to determine who they are and which roles they will play as adults. To achieve this stage of development, adolescents explore various identities, attempting to determine which values and roles are the best fit for them. When adolescents continuously compare themselves to others online, however, the opportunity for true self-exploration is negated. As a result, the adolescent becomes obsessed with attempting to meet the idealised standards presented by others online, often resulting in feelings of insecurity, confusion, and emotional distress as the

adolescent attempts to determine their own identity in the face of unrealistic online expectations.

In addition to issues of identity, there is also the problem of seeking peer approval through the design of social media. Features such as likes, comments and followers are a visible example of social approval. In his work on adolescent identity, Erikson stated that adolescents seek feedback from their peers as they search for identity. However, online feedback is typically insignificant, random and based on trends. Therefore, adolescents searching for identity online who receive validation from their digital posts are likely to experience increased anxiety when their posts are not received as well as they had hoped. Nesi and Prinstein (2015) found that adolescents who received frequent online feedback reported increased levels of depressive symptoms. This is consistent with Erikson's argument that identity search becomes unstable when it is externalised rather than internalised.

Furthermore, adolescents are exposed to fear of missing out (FOMO) phenomenon on social media. The posts of others, be it their friends or those they have recently come across, can give the impression that they are having fun and thus that the user is missing out on something. This can, in turn, undermine their sense of belonging, which is a key component of identity development and emotional well-being. The need to constantly check social media for updates from peers can be overwhelming for adolescents and lead to negative effects on their sleep, to increased stress and even to symptoms of depression (Scott & Woods, 2018). A good example of this is Snapchat, where the messages from friends disappear after a certain time, leaving adolescents with a sense of missing something. For Erikson, a feeling of belonging to a group of peers is an important aspect of the process of identity formation of adolescents.

While Erikson's theory of psychosocial development sheds light on identity-related challenges faced by adolescents, early relational experiences of adolescents can be better understood by referring to Bowlby's attachment theory. Bowlby (1969) described how children's early attachment experiences are stored in their internal working models of self and others. These models form the basis of how adolescents perceive themselves and others, and how they behave. Adolescents with a secure attachment history have sufficient emotional regulation and a stable self-concept, which enables them to deal with social media in a less negative way than others. In contrast, adolescents with an insecure attachment style are more sensitive to the online environment than their securely attached peers. Research found that adolescents with an insecure attachment style engage in more problematic uses of social media than their securely attached peers, and that these negative uses of social media are related to increased

levels of anxiety and depression (Monacis et al., 2017). Thus, for these adolescents' social media can become a substitute for their unmet emotional needs, but in a negative way.

Yet another risk of social media for the psychological development of adolescents is cyberbullying. Through the work of Bowlby, the long-term effects of negative online interactions on the mental health of an adolescent can be explained. Research has proven that victims of cyberbullying are more likely to develop depression, experience anxiety and even have thoughts of suicide (Hamm et al., 2015). Bowlby noted that individuals with secure attachments can regulate their emotions better than those with insecure attachments in times of stress. Therefore, it is not surprising that negative online interactions have the potential to have long lasting effects on the mental health of adolescents with insecure attachments.

Most social media are designed with additive strategies, for example notifications, personalised content and unlimited scrolling to capture and retain attention. They are especially difficult for adolescents with developing impulse control and immature executive functions. Excessive social media use can disrupt sleep, academic performance, and face-to-face relationships. Poor sleep has been identified as a mediator between social media use and depressive symptoms (Scott & Woods, 2018). This is a time of life for teenagers to reflect on their life so far and to explore, learn and grow as young people. They also need stable and supportive relationships with family and friends, which are proposed by Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory to be as important in this age as in any other. Social media that fills a large part of a teenager's time and emotions will interfere with these offline experiences that are so good for their development. It can also interfere with their in person social interactions leading to reliance of digital communication and potentially even causing and/or reinforcing an insecure attachment style.

However, there is evidence to show that all adolescents are not affected positively by social media. As Erikson (1968) stated, as well as Bowlby (1969), individual differences are a major factor which influences any person's developmental outcome. For example, the adolescent with secure attachments and a good support system from family and friends will find that social media is another positive aspect to their life. They will be able to express themselves creatively and communicate with people from all corners of the globe. The adolescent with an established identity will also be affected by social media in a different way to their peers. The online comparisons with others and need for validation from their peers will not have the same effect on them as it would on other people of a similar age. In conclusion, social media is not inherently negative and will have many different effects depending on the individual user and their developmental stage, relationships and personality.

Nevertheless, many adolescents are subjected to identity-related pressure, attachment-related vulnerability and pressure of addictive design of social media. Consequently, the developmental processes of many adolescents are affected by their digital environment. The mentioned risks may have serious consequences for adolescents' and young adults' mental health in the short and long term. In many cases, even in adulthood, symptoms of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and social isolation will persist.

CONCLUSION

Social media has a growing influence on adolescents' mental health. This is well explained by two psychological theories, Erikson's psychosocial development theory and Bowlby's attachment theory. These two psychological theories provide an in-depth analysis of the complex relationship that exists between social media and an adolescent's mental health. To negate any potential risks to the adolescent's mental health, the adolescent must use social media in a reflective manner and in balance with real life. The adolescent also needs to have secure relationships with others and the opportunity to form an identity in real life.

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