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Discuss impact of social media on mental health in adolescence.

Adolescence is a developmental stage of immense psychological, social and neurological change. In today's digital age, this phase of life is increasingly shaped by social media and a place of significant socialization for teenagers. Studies have shown that the daily use of social media among adolescents is more than three hours and that the more they use social media, the higher the rate of clinical anxiety and depression (Pickavance 2025). This widespread, speedy alignment of virtual platforms with everyday existence has provoked much global debate over their psychological safety, and government authorities have put forward and created several strict age limits (Kosola 2026). Although empirical studies have shown an association between digital immersion and mental health issues, theoretical models are needed to elucidate the mechanisms driving this association. This essay will explore two key developmental theories, psychosocial development theory of Erik Erikson and social learning theory of Albert Bandura, to understand how social media affects the mental health of adolescents. These models will be applied to evaluate how the digital landscape has affected identity consolidation and has enabled the modelling of maladaptive behaviour, and to determine the usefulness of each model for explaining today's adolescent distress.

According to Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, the human life passes through eight stages each characterized by central psychosocial conflict(s) that should be resolved to allow for a healthy psychological development. The fifth stage of development, "Identity versus Role Confusion" (Norris 2025), is the main developmental struggle of adolescents around the age of 12 to 18 years. People feel a deep need to establish a clear and consistent identity in this time, as they explore and combine their own values, beliefs and aspirations with those of their peers and society as a whole (Razlin 2025). Successful coping with this crisis results in the virtue of fidelity, which involves a sense of belonging and secure self-concept. However, if this stage is not successfully managed, the adolescent can suffer from role confusion, a lack of self-identity, a sense of being vulnerable to outside forces and uncertainties around their next steps. Erikson stressed the need for a "psychosocial moratorium" (a safe, reflective time of experimentation and exploration in which adolescents can try out various roles without the consequences of permanent societal judgments). It is an important trial and error mechanism for internalizing the "true self" in terms of the externals of the social environment.

Erikson's psychosocial model helps to illuminate the ways in which social media platforms are profoundly impacting the development of adolescents' identity formation. In contrast to those safe and private spaces for identity experimentation, today's young people create carefully packaged, idealized, and limited versions of themselves in a public and lasting online space (Allen 2018). The "digital performance" that is a constant feature of life for teenagers is forcing them to seek external validation in the form of likes, comments and shares, which create a

situation of “outsourcing identity” (Norris 2025). As a result, teens often feel confused about who they are both offline and online, and between their actual self and the idealized image they have created of themselves. This problem is compounded by the fact that digital footprints last longer than those of previous generations, and with social faux pas and embarrassing moments now permanently recorded and publicly showcased, the youth are unable to forget or discard the experiments of their identities (Norris 2025). This lack of privacy makes it difficult to shape their personal narrative, increasing self-doubt, anxiety and depressive symptoms when the feedback from online is negative or inadequate. By allowing adolescents to immerse themselves in the highly gamified world of social media, they are encouraged to take on multiple fragmented identities that are externally defined, and that increase their likelihood of clinical psychological suffering.

One of the key assets of applying Erikson's theory is its ability to absorb the inner/qualitative crisis of selfhood experienced by the adolescent in the highly public digital environment. It manages to make sense of the fact that teens are especially susceptible to psychological pressures of online validation, and that social media isn't just distracting; it's a direct assault on their ego identity. Erikson's theory has some significant drawbacks, however. The theory was first developed during the middle of the twentieth century and has been very individualistic, with little capacity to describe the algorithmic, non-humane agents that actively construct today's digital landscapes. It does not fully represent the multi-layered nature of virtual space and its ability to both facilitate and obstruct self-concept as a person would experience in a physical, face-to-face setting. Additionally, some researchers point out that Erikson's model fails to adequately consider the unique socio-economic and cultural differences that shape the use and reactions of various adolescent subgroups in social media environments.

Albert Bandura's social learning theory (now known as social cognitive theory) does not look inward at developmental crises but instead treats the acquisition of new behaviours as a process that takes place in the mind of the individual and relies on social interactions with the environment. Bandura suggested that observational learning or modelling is the primary method of learning in which people watch and then mimic the behaviours, attitudes, and emotions of others (McLeod 2023). The four cognitive mechanisms that control this modelling process are attention, retention, reproduction and motivation (Bouchrika 2026). Adolescents are especially susceptible to the behaviours that are modelled by others they see as "similar other" or "high status. Moreover, Bandura proposed "vicarious reinforcement" which refers to the fact that people may imitate a behaviour without having to go through the same reinforcement that the model experienced. (McLeod 2023). A key feature of this theory is the idea of self-efficacy, which refers to the person's confidence in his/her ability to engage in

actions needed to achieve specific performance outcomes. These all play into a reciprocal determinism, meaning that one's cognitive set, behaviour, and environment all interact with one another over time (Villamil and King 2024).

Bandura's social learning theory is very relevant in the digital space, which is a huge, ongoing experiment in observational learning through social media. On social media sites such as Instagram and TikTok, teens are constantly bombarded by models and influencers whose behaviour is reinforced on a massive scale through social status, social engagement, and public accolades (Deaton 2015). The continuous exposure to these models causes teens to emulate behaviours—sometimes extremely harmful ones. For example, within the context of filtered and idealized body images, which are omnipresent in society, adolescents make sense of and try to emulate. If teens cannot physically achieve these unattainable goals, their self-efficacy about their physical appearance and social competence drops significantly, which ultimately leads to higher rates of body dissatisfaction, anxiety and eating disorders (Haidt 2026). Furthermore, social media algorithms serve as potent environmental factors in reciprocity, as they continuously reinforce comparison behaviours, by constantly exposing users to more extreme content (Villamil and King 2024). Constant observation of peer behaviours, reinforcement from digital feedback and then self-evaluation creates a very addictive cycle. Hence, the virtual world teaches teens harmful habits, which negatively affects their mental health by providing systematic peer modelling of unattainable lifestyle and aesthetic goals.

Bandura's theory has enabled the most valuable practical focus on the interaction among the person, the behaviour, and digital environments as they are observed. The theory delineates clear cognitive events (e.g., attention, vicarious reinforcement), thereby offering a model that is very actionable to understand how algorithmic feedback loops affect adolescent behaviour and self-efficacy. However, the theory has its weaknesses. Social learning theory has a strong focus on observable behaviour and cues from the environment, yet it may overlook the underlying, more profound emotional vulnerabilities and physiological changes of adolescence. It can make the viewer look up to the model; sometimes it fails to consider individual agency or the ability of some adolescents to resist harmful digital content actively. Moreover, the model is very good at explaining the acquisition and replication of behaviours in the online world, but it is less able to explain existential identity crises and long-term existential anxiety, which are covered very well within the inner model of Erikson.

To sum up, the essay has demonstrated how social media has a deep, multi-layered effect on the mental health of adolescents, altering identity development and allowing for behaviours to become problematic. According to Erikson's psychosocial theory, social media adversely

affects the moratorium period, turning adolescents into players destined for tackling their role confusion in a fiercely judgmental, public sphere of social media. At the same time, an understanding of the necessity of algorithmic feedback loops and peer models in systematic self-efficacy degradation via unrealistic comparison and vicarious reinforcement is provided by leading to Bandura's social learning theory. Bandura's social learning theory, in turn, gives extra emphasis to how algorithmic feedback loops and peer modelling play systems roles in the reduction of self-efficacy over realistic comparisons and algorithmic reinforcement. Both frameworks present good knowledge but separately they're not enough. Erikson's theory is especially helpful in understanding the internal and existential stresses of youth while Bandura's helps us understand the external, behavioural dynamics of digital reinforcement. Hence, a syncretic methodology based on these two theories is necessary to understand adolescent mental health because the virtual space influences internal psychological processes and external behaviour in young people in the 21st century.

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