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University of Wales
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Module name: Psychology in health and social care.

Module code: LCHS4003_LON.

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Acknowledge use of AI

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Discuss the impact of social media on mental health in adolescence.



Introduction

On these days we can see how technology is empowering and getting more used by adolescents, social media has become an important part of everyday life, especially for adolescents. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat allow young people to communicate with friends, share information and express themselves. However, social media can also have negative effects on mental health, such as causing anxiety, low self-esteem, loneliness and stress. Adolescence is an important stage of development because young people are developing their identity and relationships with others. This means that social media may have a significant influence on their mental wellbeing. This essay will discuss the impact of social media on mental health in adolescence by using Erikson's psychosocial development theory and Bowlby's attachment theory. It will consider both the positive and negative effects of social media on young people. For example, a 2025 scoping review of 43 reviews found that social media was frequently associated with depression and anxiety, particularly where use was problematic or passive, but it also identified benefits such as social support and reduced isolation.

Main body

Social media is particularly important during adolescence because this is a time when young people experience many physical, emotional and social changes. Adolescents often become more independent and place greater importance on friendships and how they are viewed by others. Social media provides a space where they can interact with their peers and receive opinions and feedback. However, this can also create pressure to gain attention and approval from others. Seeing pictures or posts that show an idealised lifestyle may cause young people to compare themselves with others and feel that they are not good enough. This can affect their confidence and overall mental wellbeing. On the other hand, social media can provide a sense of belonging, especially for adolescents who may feel isolated in their everyday lives. Online communities can allow young people to communicate with others who have similar interests or experiences. Therefore, the effect of social media on adolescent mental health is complex, as it can provide both support and challenges. Understanding these different effects is important when considering the relationship between social media and the mental health of young people.

Here are different theories and perspectives for example:



Erikson's psychosocial theory proposes that adolescence is characterised by the conflict between identity and role confusion. During this period, young people explore different roles, values and behaviours to develop a coherent sense of identity. Social media provides an environment in which this exploration can occur because adolescents can present different aspects of themselves, communicate with peers and receive immediate feedback. In this sense, social media may support healthy identity development by allowing adolescents to explore interests and social roles and to connect with people who share similar experiences.

However, the same process may create difficulties when adolescents become highly dependent on external validation. Likes, comments, followers and other forms of feedback can become measures through which young people evaluate their social acceptance. If an adolescent repeatedly receives negative feedback or compares themselves unfavourably with others, social media may contribute to feelings of inadequacy or role confusion.



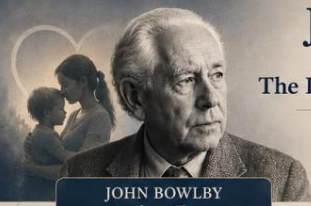
Bowlby's attachment theory provides another explanation for the relationship between social media and adolescent mental health. Attachment theory emphasises the importance of relationships in providing security and a sense of emotional safety. Although attachment is established during early development, relationships with parents and peers remain important during adolescence. Social media can potentially support these relationships by allowing adolescents to communicate with friends and maintain social connections outside school and the home.

Conversely, adolescents who experience insecurity in their relationships may use social media to seek reassurance, acceptance or validation. This may become problematic if online approval becomes an important source of emotional regulation. Research has identified an association between attachment anxiety and problematic social-media use, although evidence from this area should be interpreted cautiously because some studies have focused on young adults rather than adolescents.

John Bowlby & Erik Erikson

A Comparison of Theories and Their Relevance to The Impact of Social Media on Mental Health in Adolescence

*"Understanding the self and relationships is key
to supporting adolescents in a digital world."*



JOHN BOWLBY
Attachment Theory

CORE FOCUS
The importance of early emotional bonds and attachment in shaping development, relationships, and well-being.

KEY CONCEPTS

- **Attachment Styles:** Secure, Insecure-Avoidant, Insecure-Ambivalent, Disorganized
- **Internal Working Models:** Early experiences shape how we view ourselves and others
- **Safe Haven & Secure Base:** Supportive relationships provide security for exploration and coping
- **Lifelong Impact:** Early attachment influences emotional regulation, relationships, and mental health across the lifespan

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA & ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH
Online interactions can either fulfill or undermine adolescents' need for connection and security.

- Insecurely attached adolescents may seek excessive online validation or approval.
- Social media can trigger anxiety related to rejection, abandonment, or inconsistent responses.
- Supportive online relationships can act as a secure base, promoting resilience and well-being.

INTEGRATED PERSPECTIVE
Bowlby reminds us that adolescents need secure, trusting relationships—both offline and online—to feel safe and valued. Erikson reminds us that adolescents are in a critical stage of identity formation, and their social environments shape who they become.

THEORIES IN COMPARISON

BOWLBY		ERIKSON
Focuses on early relationships and attachment bonds.	FOCUS	Focuses on lifelong psychosocial development through stages.
Emphasizes the impact of caregiver relationships in infancy and childhood.	RELATIONSHIPS	Emphasizes social interactions and cultural context across the lifespan.
Internal working models guide emotions, relationships, and responses to stress.	DEVELOPMENT	Ego identity develops through resolving psychosocial crises and building a sense of self.
Security comes from consistent, responsive caregiving.	OUTCOME	Healthy development comes from resolving crises successfully and building strengths.
Explains emotional regulation, attachment behaviors, and relationship patterns.	RELEVANCE TODAY	Explains identity formation, self-esteem, and social roles in a changing world.
Helps us understand how adolescents use relationships (including online) to seek safety and connection.	SOCIAL MEDIA RELEVANCE	Helps us understand how adolescents form identity, compare themselves, and navigate roles online.

TOGETHER: A HOLISTIC UNDERSTANDING
Adolescents thrive when they have secure attachments AND positive opportunities to explore and build their identity. Social media can be a tool for connection and growth—or a source of stress and confusion—depending on the quality of relationships and the support they receive.



Secure relationships build the foundation for healthy exploration.



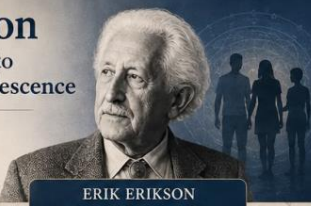
Positive online experiences can support identity and well-being.



Negative online experiences can threaten security and identity.



Support from caregivers, educators, and peers is essential in the digital age.



ERIK ERIKSON
Psychosocial Development Theory

CORE FOCUS
The development of ego identity through psychosocial stages across the lifespan.

KEY CONCEPTS

- **Psychosocial Stages:** Identity vs. Role Confusion is central in adolescence.
- **Identity Formation:** Adolescents explore values, beliefs, and roles to form a sense of self.
- **Social Context:** Peer groups, culture, and society influence development.
- **Ego Strength:** Successfully resolving crises builds competence, fidelity, and resilience.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA & ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH
Social media is a key context for identity exploration—but also for risk.

- Constant comparison can lead to identity confusion and low self-esteem.
- Online personas may create pressure to conform or seek approval.
- Positive engagement can support identity exploration, belonging, and purpose.

KEY TAKEAWAY
By integrating Bowlby's focus on attachment and Erikson's focus on identity, we can better understand the complex ways social media affects adolescent mental health—and how to support them in building a secure sense of self in a connected world.

*"The quality of early relationships shapes our capacity to love and trust;
the search for identity shapes how we find our place in the world." — Bowlby & Erikson*

Erikson's psychosocial development theory and Bowlby's attachment theory can both help explain how social media may affect the mental health of adolescents, but they focus on different areas of development. Erikson's theory focuses on identity development. He suggested that adolescence is an important stage known as identity versus role confusion, where young people develop an understanding of who they are and how they fit into society (Erikson, 1968). Social media can influence this process because adolescents can express themselves, share their interests and receive feedback from others. Positive feedback may improve confidence, while negative comments, bullying and comparing themselves with others may lead to low self-esteem, anxiety and confusion about their identity.

In comparison, Bowlby's attachment theory focuses on the importance of emotional relationships and security. Bowlby (1982) suggested that early relationships with caregivers can influence how people form relationships later in life. During adolescence, friendships and relationships with others remain important. Social media can help young people stay connected with friends and receive support, which may reduce feelings of loneliness. However, some adolescents may rely on likes, comments and messages to feel accepted or valued. Not receiving this attention may negatively affect their mood and self-esteem.

Overall, Erikson's theory is useful for explaining how social media can affect identity and self-image, while Bowlby's theory helps explain its effects on relationships and emotional security. Both theories show that social media can have positive and negative effects depending on the individual and how they use it.

🌈 Social media may:

- Maintain friendships;
- Reduce feelings of isolation;
- Provide peer support;
- Allow young people to find communities with similar experiences;
- Provide mental-health information;
- Allow self-expression;
- Support identity exploration.

Research involving adolescents has found that social media can provide social connectivity, stress reduction, mental-health information and peer support. A 2025 review likewise identified social connection, identity development and access to mental-health support/information as potential benefits. Therefore, the impact of social media should not be understood simply in terms of screen time; the purpose, content and context of use are also important.

Critical comment on the relevance of my chosen theories to supporting older adults in health and social care:

Bowlby's Attachment Theory is relevant to supporting older adults because it highlights the importance of secure and meaningful relationships throughout life. In health and social care, older adults may experience bereavement, loneliness, changes in independence or separation from family, which can affect their emotional well-being

Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory is also relevant because it recognises that psychological development continues throughout the lifespan. His final stage, ego integrity versus despair, is particularly relevant to older adults, as individuals may reflect on their life experiences and develop a sense of acceptance and fulfilment, or alternatively experience regret and despair. Health and social care professionals can use this perspective to encourage older adults to maintain independence, discuss meaningful life experiences and participate in activities that promote dignity, purpose and well-being.

Overall, both theories are useful frameworks for understanding the emotional and psychological needs of older adults, but they should be applied critically rather than as definitive explanations of behaviour.

In conclusion, social media can have both positive and negative implications for adolescent mental health. Excessive or problematic use may be associated with anxiety, depression, poor wellbeing, social comparison and difficulties relating to body image, while social media can also provide opportunities for social connection, peer support and identity exploration. Erikson's psychosocial theory helps explain why social media may have particular significance during adolescence, as young people are developing their identities and seeking acceptance from their peers. Bowlby's attachment theory provides an additional explanation by highlighting the importance of secure relationships and the potential for individuals to seek reassurance and connection through online interactions

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