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Discuss the impact of social media on mental health in adolescence

Introduction

Social media has become an important part of everyday life for many adolescents. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and YouTube enable young people to communicate, share photographs and videos, follow trends and access information. These platforms can provide entertainment, opportunities for self-expression and ways to maintain friendships. However, increasing evidence suggests that excessive or harmful social media use may negatively affect adolescent mental health. Heavy use has been associated with anxiety, depression, reduced self-esteem, poor sleep and body image concerns (Twenge, Martin and Campbell, 2018).

Adolescence is a significant stage of development during which young people experience physical, emotional and social changes. They begin to establish their identity, seek greater independence and place increasing importance on peer relationships. As social acceptance becomes particularly meaningful during this period, interactions on social media may have a powerful influence on emotional wellbeing.

This essay explores the impact of social media on adolescent mental health by applying Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and John Bowlby's attachment theory. It examines how social media may contribute to social comparison, fear of missing out (FOMO), cyberbullying and poor sleep, while also recognising that social media can provide valuable opportunities for connection, support and self-expression.

Main body

Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development proposes that adolescence is characterised by the stage of identity versus role confusion (Erikson, 1968). During this stage, young people explore their beliefs, interests and future aspirations to develop a secure sense of identity. Successfully resolving this stage leads to increased confidence, whereas difficulties may result in insecurity, uncertainty and low self-esteem. Social media has become an important space where adolescents explore and present their identities. Young people often choose photographs, opinions and personal interests that they believe will receive positive feedback from others. Likes, comments and follower numbers may become measures of popularity or self-worth rather than simple indicators of online engagement. Research by Nesi and Prinstein (2015) found that social comparison and feedback-seeking on social media are associated with increased depressive symptoms among adolescents. Young people may become dependent on external validation instead of developing confidence

through their own abilities and real-life relationships. This reliance on online approval may interfere with healthy identity development as described by Erikson. Social comparison is a major concern because users generally present carefully selected highlights of their lives rather than everyday experiences. Images of holidays, achievements, friendships and physical appearance often create unrealistic standards against which adolescents compare themselves. Even when teenagers recognise that photographs may be edited or filtered, repeated exposure to idealised content can still reduce self-esteem. Valkenburg and Peter (2011) argue that online communication provides both opportunities and risks. While social media allows adolescents to maintain friendships and express themselves, it may also expose them to rejection, criticism and unhealthy comparisons. Adolescents who are still developing their identity may therefore become particularly vulnerable to negative emotional outcomes. Body image is another area strongly influenced by social media. Many platforms are dominated by images of celebrities, influencers and content creators whose appearances have often been enhanced through filters or editing software. Constant exposure to these unrealistic beauty standards may cause adolescents to become dissatisfied with their own appearance.

Negative body image has been associated with anxiety, depression and unhealthy eating behaviours. Unlike previous generations, who encountered idealised images mainly through magazines or television, today's adolescents have continuous access to appearance-focused content throughout the day. This constant exposure increases opportunities for comparison and may intensify feelings of inadequacy. Bowlby's attachment theory also helps explain why social media can affect adolescent mental health. Bowlby (1969) proposed that secure emotional attachments provide a foundation for confidence, trust and healthy relationships. During adolescence, peer relationships become increasingly important, and social media provides almost constant access to friends through messaging, group chats and shared content. This constant connection can offer emotional support. Adolescents experiencing loneliness, anxiety or social isolation may find reassurance through online communication. Social media may also provide supportive communities for young people who feel different because of disability, sexuality, culture or uncommon interests. However, permanent online access may also increase emotional dependence on peer responses. Teenagers may repeatedly check whether messages have been read, whether posts have received likes or whether someone has viewed their stories. Delayed replies or a lack of online interaction may be interpreted as rejection, particularly by young people who already experience insecurity within relationships. Przybylski et al. (2013) describe fear of missing out (FOMO) as the anxiety that others are having rewarding experiences without you. Social media can intensify these feelings by constantly displaying photographs and videos of friends attending events or socialising. Even when exclusion is unintentional, adolescents may feel

isolated or believe they are less valued by their peers. This may create a cycle in which young people spend increasing amounts of time online seeking reassurance. Rather than reducing anxiety, excessive checking often reinforces concerns about acceptance and belonging, contributing to emotional distress.

Although social media facilitates communication, it cannot fully replace face-to-face interaction. In-person communication provides tone of voice, facial expressions and body language that help individuals understand emotions and resolve misunderstandings. Spies Shapiro and Margolin (2014) suggest that while online communication can strengthen relationships, it may also increase misunderstandings because digital messages often lack emotional context. Consequently, adolescents may have large numbers of online followers while still experiencing loneliness. If social media replaces meaningful face-to-face interactions, opportunities to develop communication skills, conflict resolution and emotional resilience may be reduced.

Cyberbullying represents one of the most harmful aspects of social media. Online bullying may involve abusive messages, rumours, threats, sharing embarrassing images or deliberately excluding individuals from online groups. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying may continue throughout the day and reach large audiences almost instantly. The psychological consequences can be severe. Victims may experience anxiety, depression, reduced self-esteem, school avoidance and, in serious cases, self-harm or suicidal thoughts. The inability to escape online abuse may make its effects particularly damaging during adolescence, when peer acceptance is especially important. Social media can also disrupt healthy sleep patterns. Many adolescents continue using their phones late into the evening, scrolling through content, watching videos or communicating with friends. Notifications and emotionally stimulating content may delay sleep, while blue light emitted from screens can interfere with the body's natural sleep cycle. Poor sleep affects concentration, emotional regulation and academic performance and has been linked to increased symptoms of anxiety and depression. Orben, Tomova and Blakemore (2020) emphasise the importance of healthy social experiences during adolescence, suggesting that although online communication can support relationships, it cannot fully replace the benefits of meaningful in-person interaction or healthy daily routines.

Despite these concerns, social media should not be viewed as entirely harmful. Its impact depends on factors such as how it is used, the amount of time spent online, and the nature of the content viewed. Many adolescents use social media positively to maintain friendships, express creativity, access educational resources and participate in supportive online communities. For young people experiencing isolation because of disability, mental health difficulties, sexuality or cultural background, online communities may provide encouragement and reduce feelings of loneliness. Social media can also increase awareness of mental health issues and encourage

adolescents to seek support. However, not all online information is accurate, highlighting the importance of teaching young people to evaluate digital information critically. Parents, schools and health and social care professionals all play important roles in promoting healthy social media use. Restricting access alone is unlikely to be effective because social media forms an important part of many adolescents' social lives. Instead, young people should be encouraged to develop balanced habits, including limiting screen time before bed, turning off unnecessary notifications and following accounts that promote positive wellbeing.

Schools should educate students about cyberbullying, online safety, body image and responsible digital behaviour. Health and social care professionals should also include discussions about social media when assessing sleep, anxiety, mood and relationships, recognising that online experiences may significantly influence mental wellbeing.

Conclusion

Social media has both positive and negative effects on adolescent mental health. It provides opportunities for communication, creativity and social support but may also contribute to anxiety, depression, body dissatisfaction, poor sleep and reduced self-esteem when used excessively or negatively.

Erikson's theory demonstrates how social media may complicate identity development by increasing reliance on online approval and encouraging unhealthy social comparison. Bowlby's attachment theory explains why online rejection, delayed responses and fear of missing out may have powerful emotional effects during adolescence. Together, these theories help explain why adolescents are particularly sensitive to online experiences.

Ultimately, the impact of social media depends on the individual, the quality of their relationships, the content they engage with and the balance between online and offline life. By promoting digital literacy, healthy boundaries and supportive relationships, parents, schools and health and social care professionals can help adolescents benefit from the positive aspects of social media while reducing its potential risks.

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