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The impact of social media on mental health in adolescence

This essay argues that although social media offers opportunities for communication, identity development, and social support, excessive or problematic use can negatively affect adolescent mental health through increased anxiety, depression, poor self-esteem, and cyberbullying. These impacts are explored using Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory and John Bowlby's attachment theory as interpretive frameworks.

Peer relationships become increasingly important during adolescence because young people begin to seek greater independence from their parents while relying more heavily on friendships for emotional support, identity development, and social acceptance. During this developmental stage, acceptance by peers contributes significantly to self-esteem, confidence, and psychological well-being. Social media extends these peer relationships beyond school hours, allowing adolescents to communicate continuously through messaging, group chats, and shared online experiences. While these interactions can strengthen friendships and increase feelings of belonging, they may also increase pressure to remain constantly available online, making peer approval more influential than ever before (UNICEF, 2023; Steinberg, 2020).

As a result, the boundaries between public and private life become less defined, increasing the developmental pressures adolescents experience regarding peer acceptance and social standing. Cyberbullying, Identity, Social Comparison, and the Eriksonian Lens According to Erik Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory of human development, adolescence is defined by the fifth developmental crisis: Identity vs Role Confusion. During this phase, individuals experiment with social roles, values, and visual presentations to build a coherent sense of self. Social media platforms serve as interactive dynamic stages where adolescents present curated personas to earn feedback from peers. Positive digital validation (such as "likes," positive comments, and shares) can bolster self-concept; however, the reliance on external metrics makes identity formation precarious and vulnerable to continuous external evaluation (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015).

Despite the opportunities for self-expression, social media frequently exposes adolescents to carefully edited and idealized images of celebrities, influencers, and peers. These images often portray unrealistic standards of beauty, wealth, and success, encouraging young people to

compare their own appearance and achievements with others. Such upward social comparisons can reduce self-esteem, increase body dissatisfaction, and contribute to feelings of inadequacy, particularly among adolescents who are already vulnerable to negative self-evaluation (Vogel et al., 2014; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) further contributes to psychological distress by creating anxiety that others are enjoying rewarding experiences without them. Adolescents may feel compelled to check social media repeatedly to avoid missing social interactions, resulting in compulsive use and increased emotional dependence on online platforms. From Erikson's perspective, adolescents are especially susceptible to these pressures because they are actively developing their identity and seeking acceptance from their peers. Consequently, social comparison and FOMO may interfere with healthy identity formation by encouraging adolescents to measure their self-worth through external validation rather than developing a stable internal sense of identity (Erikson, 1968; Przybylski et al., 2013).

Research indicates a correlation between excessive social media usage and heightened depressive symptoms among adolescents, driven by sleep displacement and reduced face-to-face social contact (Twenge et al., 2018; Kelly et al., 2019). The biological impact of screen usage specifically screen time late at night disrupts daily rhythms by suppressing melatonin secretion, leading to sleep deprivation. Chronic sleep disruption adversely affects emotional regulation and executive functioning, lowering an adolescent's psychological edge against anxiety disorders and major depressive episodes (Salfi et al., 2020; Lisbona et al., 2022). Unlike traditional bullying, online bullying can occur at any time of the day, reach large audiences almost instantly, and often allows offenders to remain anonymous. These characteristics make cyberbullying particularly difficult for victims to escape, increasing feelings of fear, embarrassment, and helplessness (Kowalski et al., 2014).

Research consistently demonstrates that adolescents who experience cyberbullying are at significantly greater risk of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideation compared with those who are not bullied online. Victims frequently report emotional distress, social withdrawal, and reduced academic performance, while repeated exposure to abusive messages or public humiliation may have long-lasting psychological consequences. These findings highlight the importance of schools, families, and social media companies working together to promote

online safety and provide appropriate support for vulnerable young people (John et al., 2018; World Health Organization [WHO], 2024).

Bowlby's Attachment Theory and Online Validation Bowlby's Attachment Theory provides another useful explanation for how social media influences adolescent mental health. Bowlby (1988) argued that children who develop secure attachments with caregivers are more likely to develop confidence, emotional resilience, and healthy interpersonal relationships. As adolescents become more independent, these secure attachment patterns continue to influence how they seek support and regulate emotions during stressful situations. In contrast, adolescents with insecure attachment styles may rely more heavily on social media to obtain reassurance, acceptance, and validation from others. Receiving likes, comments, and positive feedback may temporarily reduce feelings of insecurity; however, dependence on online approval can increase anxiety when expected responses are not received. Adolescents who rely heavily on external validation may become more emotionally affected by negative comments or social rejection, making them increasingly vulnerable to poor mental health outcomes (Oldmeadow et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, Bowlby's theory also suggests that supportive relationships can promote resilience, for some adolescents who lack emotional support within their family environment, positive online friendships may provide encouragement, belonging, and emotional understanding. Online communities can therefore partially compensate for limited offline support, particularly for marginalized young people, although they should not replace secure and supportive relationships in everyday life (Best et al., 2014). **Differential Vulnerability and Patterns of Use** Although many studies report associations between social media use and poorer mental health, it is important to recognize that not all adolescents experience negative effects. Individual outcomes depend on several interacting factors, including the amount of time spent online, the type of activities undertaken, parental monitoring, digital literacy, personality traits, and existing mental health conditions (Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

The quality of social media use may be more important than the quantity. Active engagement, such as messaging friends, participating in supportive groups, and creating content, is generally associated with greater social connectedness and well-being. In contrast, passive behaviors such as scrolling through posts without interaction are more strongly associated with loneliness, envy, and lower self-esteem because they encourage social comparison and reduced face-to-face interaction (Verduyn et al., 2017). These findings demonstrate that social media itself is neither

entirely beneficial nor harmful; instead, its impact depends on how adolescents use these platforms and the personal circumstances in which they are used.

Furthermore, in response to growing concerns about the impact of social media on young people's mental health, the UK Government announced plans in 2026 to prohibit social media platforms from providing services to children under the age of 16, with the legislation expected to be implemented from 2027. The proposed measures also include stronger age-verification requirements, restrictions on features such as livestreaming and contact from strangers, and default overnight curfews for 16- and 17-year-olds. These reforms aim to reduce adolescents' exposure to harmful online content, addictive platform features and cyberbullying while promoting healthier patterns of digital engagement. However, the proposals have generated debate among researchers and policymakers. Supporters argue that the restrictions will help protect children's mental health and wellbeing, whereas critics question whether age-based bans alone will be effective, suggesting that improvements in digital literacy, parental involvement and safer platform design are also necessary to address the complex relationship between social media use and adolescent mental health.

In conclusion, social media has become an integral part of adolescent life and has both positive and negative implications for mental health. It provides opportunities to maintain friendships, access emotional support, explore identity, and connect with communities that may not be available offline. However, excessive or problematic use has also been associated with anxiety, depression, loneliness, sleep disruption, cyberbullying, and unhealthy social comparison. Erikson's psychosocial theory helps explain why adolescents are particularly vulnerable to online feedback and social comparison during identity formation, while Bowlby's Attachment Theory demonstrates how early attachment experiences influence adolescents' reliance on online validation and emotional support. Importantly, current research suggests that social media does not affect all adolescents in the same way. Factors such as personality, existing mental health, parental guidance, digital literacy, and patterns of social media use all influence outcomes. Active and purposeful engagement appears to be healthier than passive scrolling. As social media continues to evolve, promoting balanced use, digital education, and supportive family and peer relationships will be essential for protecting adolescent mental health. Future longitudinal research is needed to better understand the long-term effects of social media use on psychological well-being across adolescence.

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