

Student Name- Rachel Hathaway

Student Number- 2509406

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Lecturer- Rizwan Nadim

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Introduction

The widespread use of social media has transformed the way teenagers communicate, form relationships and how they express themselves. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat and X (formerly Twitter) have now become a main part of young people's daily lives, providing opportunities for learning, social interaction and entertainment. (Ofcom, 2024). Recent research suggests that most adolescents engage with social media every day, often for several hours, making it one of the most influential aspects of modern adolescence (Anderson and Jiang, 2018).

Although social media offers many advantages, including increased social linkage, access to educational resources and opportunities for self-expression, there is increasing concern about its effects on adolescent mental health. Exorbitant social media use has been associated with heightened levels of depression and anxiety, low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, sleep disruption and cyberbullying, although the strength of these relationships varies between individuals (Keles, McCrae and Grealish, 2020).

As social media increasingly influences how adolescents perceive themselves and interact with others, understanding its impact has become an important area of psychological research.

Psychological theories provide valuable frameworks for understanding why social media affects adolescents differently. [Erikson's theory of psychosocial development](#) emphasises that adolescence is characterised by the stage of identity versus role confusion, during which young people seek to establish a stable sense of self (Erikson, 1968).

Meanwhile, [Bowlby's attachment theory](#) highlights the importance of secure relationships during development and suggests that attachment patterns influence emotional regulation and social relationships throughout life (Bowlby, 1988). These theories help explain how social media can either support healthy psychological development or contribute to mental health difficulties depending on individual experiences and environmental factors.

This essay discusses how social media impacts adolescent's mental health by reviewing both the negative and positive effects of online engagement. It draws on Erikson's psychosocial development theory and Bowlby's attachment theory to clarify how social media can impact emotional wellness, identity formation and interpersonal relationships during adolescence.

Main discussion

Adolescence is recognised as a period during which identity formation becomes one of the most significant developmental tasks. social media enables adolescents to explore different interests, cultures, and communities that may not be available within their local environment. Young people can link with peers who share similar hobbies, experiences or identities, helping them develop confidence and a greater sense of belonging (Best, Manktelow and Taylor, 2014). For adolescents who feel socially isolated or marginalised, online communities may provide valuable emotional support and reduce feelings of loneliness. This is particularly important for young people from minority backgrounds or those experiencing difficulties in their offline relationships.

Erikson's theory suggests that these opportunities for exploration can strengthen identity development by allowing adolescents to experiment with different aspects of themselves in a supportive environment before committing to long-term values and goals. Social media influences mental health during the adolescence can have long term consequences for educational achievement, relationships and overall wellbeing (World Health Organization, 2021). Some adolescents benefit from online communities that provide emotional support and a sense of belonging, whereas others experience negative outcomes due to unrealistic social comparisons, online harassment and excessive dependence on digital validation (Odgers and Jensen, 2020).

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development offers a valuable explanation for why adolescents are particularly sensitive to social media influences. During the identity versus role confusion stage, young people actively seek acceptance, explore different identities and develop a sense of who they are. Social media can support this developmental process by allowing adolescents to connect with others who share similar interests and experiences, encouraging self expression and strengthening social belonging. At the same time, constant exposure to idealised images, online popularity measures and peer comparisons may undermine identity formation by encouraging adolescents to judge their selfworth according to external validation rather than genuine personal growth. These experiences can contribute to feelings of insecurity, low self esteem and psychological distress.

Bowlby's attachment theory further explains why the impact of social media differs between individuals. Adolescents with secure attachment relationships are generally more resilient because they possess strong emotional support from parents, caregivers and close friends. Consequently, they are more likely to use social media to maintain healthy relationships without becoming dependent on online approval. In contrast, adolescents with insecure

attachment may rely heavily on social media for reassurance and acceptance, increasing their vulnerability to anxiety, loneliness and depressive symptoms when online interactions fail to meet their emotional needs. This demonstrates that social media itself is not inherently harmful; rather, its effects are shaped by individual attachment patterns and existing support networks.

On the other hand, social media can also complicate identity development through constant exposure to unrealistic standards and social comparison. Moreover, platforms such as Instagram and TikTok often present carefully edited images and idealised lifestyles, encouraging adolescents to compare their appearance, achievements and popularity with others. According to Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory, individuals naturally evaluate themselves by comparing themselves with other people. Although this is not one of the main theories used in this essay, it supports Erikson's explanation by demonstrating how frequent comparisons during identity formation may negatively affect self-esteem and wellbeing. Therefore, adolescents who receive fewer likes, comments or followers may interpret this as evidence that they are less attractive or less successful than their peers.

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Vogel et al. (2014) found that frequent social networking site use was associated with lower self-esteem because users often compared themselves with idealised portrayals of others. Similarly, Fardouly et al. (2015) reported that exposure to appearance-focused social media content increased body dissatisfaction among young women through upward social comparisons. During Erikson's identity stage, adolescents are particularly sensitive to peer approval, making them more vulnerable to these negative influences. Rather than developing confidence through authentic self-exploration, some adolescents become increasingly dependent on external validation received through likes, comments and online popularity.

Cyberbullying represents another significant concern associated with social media use. Unlike traditional bullying, online harassment can occur continuously and reach large audiences within seconds [ref]. Victims often experience humiliation, anxiety and depression because harmful messages or images can be shared repeatedly without their control. Kowalski et al. (2014) concluded that cyberbullying is consistently associated with

poorer psychological wellbeing, increased depressive symptoms and higher levels of anxiety among adolescents. Erikson's theory helps explain why these experiences can be particularly damaging during adolescence. Negative interactions with peers may interrupt healthy identity development by reducing self-confidence and creating uncertainty about one's social acceptance. Instead of successfully resolving the identity versus role confusion stage, adolescents who experience persistent online bullying may develop feelings of inadequacy and emotional distress.

Another issue linked with excessive social media use is **sleep disruption**. Many adolescents use smartphones late into the evening, reducing both sleep quality and sleep duration. Poor sleep has been associated with impaired emotional regulation, reduced academic performance and increased symptoms of anxiety and depression (Scott and Woods, 2019). Since adolescence is already characterised by significant neurological and emotional development, insufficient sleep may further increase vulnerability to mental health difficulties. Erikson's theory suggests that when adolescents experience ongoing stress, fatigue and emotional instability, their ability to develop a positive and coherent identity may be weakened.

Bowlby's Attachment Theory provides another useful framework for understanding the relationship between social media and adolescent mental health. Bowlby's theory suggests that insecure attachment contributes to this dependence because individuals who lack confidence in relationships may seek reassurance through digital interactions rather than secure face-to-face connections. Unfortunately, online feedback is often inconsistent and unpredictable, meaning that adolescents may become trapped in a cycle of reassurance-seeking that ultimately increases emotional vulnerability.

Bowlby (1988) proposed that early relationships with caregivers influence emotional security, self-worth and the ability to develop healthy relationships throughout life. Securely attached individuals generally feel confident seeking support from others, whereas insecure attachment styles may contribute to anxiety, avoidance and difficulties regulating emotions. Although attachment develops during early childhood, its effects continue throughout adolescence and influence how young people use social media and respond to online interactions.

Adolescents with secure attachment are generally more likely to use social media as a way of maintaining existing friendships rather than replacing face-to-face relationships. Their strong offline support networks provide emotional security, reducing the likelihood that they will become overly dependent on online approval. Research by Oldmeadow, Quinn and Kowert (2013) suggests that securely attached individuals typically use social networking

sites to strengthen relationships rather than compensate for social difficulties. As a result, they are less likely to experience negative psychological consequences from social media use because their self-esteem is not solely dependent upon online feedback.

In contrast, adolescents with insecure attachment may rely heavily on social media for reassurance and validation. Constantly checking messages, counting likes or worrying about being excluded from online conversations may increase emotional distress and anxiety. Nesi, Choukas-Bradley and Prinstein (2018) argue that adolescents who place excessive importance on peer feedback through social media are more vulnerable to depression and low self-esteem.

Furthermore, social media can strengthen existing friendships by allowing adolescents to remain connected outside school hours, providing opportunities to exchange emotional support and maintain close relationships. During periods of stress or social isolation, digital communication may reduce loneliness and encourage adolescents to seek help from trusted friends. This demonstrates that social media itself is not inherently harmful. Instead, Bowlby's theory suggests that the quality of existing attachment relationships influences whether online interactions contribute positively or negatively to adolescent mental health. Young people who possess strong emotional support from parents, caregivers and close friends are generally better equipped to manage the challenges presented by social media than those with insecure attachment patterns.

Conclusion

In conclusion, social media has a significant and complex impact on adolescent mental health. While it provides valuable opportunities for communication, self expression and social support, it also presents considerable risks that can negatively affect emotional wellbeing. Research consistently demonstrates that excessive or unhealthy social media use is associated with anxiety, depression, poor self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, cyberbullying and disrupted sleep. However, these outcomes are not inevitable, as the effects of social media largely depend on how adolescents engage with online platforms, the quality of their offline relationships and their individual psychological development.

Overall, the evidence suggests that social media should be viewed as a tool with both benefits and risks rather than as a direct cause of poor mental health. Encouraging balanced social media use, promoting digital literacy and strengthening supportive family and peer

relationships may help adolescents maximise the positive aspects of online communication while reducing its potential harms. As technology continues to evolve, further research will remain essential to understanding how social media can be used to support, rather than undermine, adolescent mental health.

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