

Discuss the impact of social media on mental health in adolescence

Introduction

Social media has become a central part of adolescents' everyday lives, providing opportunities for communication, entertainment, education and self-expression. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and Facebook allow young people to maintain relationships, develop friendships and access information instantly. Recent research suggests that most adolescents engage with social media daily, making online interactions an important aspect of social development (Ofcom, 2024). Although social media can promote social connectedness and provide emotional support, concerns have been raised regarding its impact on adolescent mental health. Studies have linked excessive or problematic social media use with anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, cyberbullying and poor sleep quality (Keles, McCrae and Grealish, 2020).

Adolescence is a significant developmental stage characterised by physical, emotional and social changes. During this period, individuals develop their identities, increase their independence and become more influenced by peer relationships. Because social media plays an important role in peer communication, it has the potential to affect psychological wellbeing positively and negatively. The impact of social media is not the same for all adolescents, as individual experiences, emotional resilience and developmental factors influence how online interactions are interpreted.

Psychological theories can provide a deeper understanding of why social media affects some adolescents more than others. Attachment Theory, developed by Bowlby (1969), proposes that early relationships with caregivers shape emotional security and future social relationships. Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory (1968) suggests that adolescence is characterised by the stage of identity versus role confusion, where individuals seek to establish a coherent sense of self. This essay will explore the impact of social media on adolescent mental health by drawing upon Attachment Theory and Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory to explain how and why social media may contribute to both positive and negative psychological outcomes.

Social Media and Adolescent Mental Health

Social media offers a range of benefits for adolescents. It enables communication with peers, supports identity exploration and provides access to educational resources and mental health information. Online communities can create a sense of belonging, particularly for young people

who experience social isolation or belong to minority groups (Best, Manktelow and Taylor, 2014). Social media campaigns have also increased awareness of mental health issues and encouraged adolescents to seek support when needed.

Despite these advantages, research consistently demonstrates that excessive social media use can negatively affect mental health. A systematic review by Keles, McCrae and Grealish (2020) found significant associations between social media use and increased symptoms of depression, anxiety and psychological distress in adolescents. Prolonged exposure to idealised images and unrealistic lifestyles may lead to social comparison, negatively influencing self-esteem and body image. This effect is particularly evident among adolescent girls, who report higher levels of body dissatisfaction following exposure to appearance-focused content (Royal Society for Public Health, 2017).

Cyberbullying is another important issue associated with social media use. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying can occur continuously and reach victims regardless of location, increasing feelings of helplessness and distress. Hamm et al. (2015) found that adolescents who experience cyberbullying are more likely to report anxiety, depression, loneliness and suicidal thoughts. Additionally, excessive social media use can disrupt sleep patterns due to late-night screen use and emotional stimulation before bedtime. Poor sleep quality has been linked to reduced emotional regulation, poorer academic performance and increased mental health difficulties (Scott and Woods, 2019).

However, the relationship between social media and mental health is complex. Social media itself is not inherently harmful; rather, the effects depend on how platforms are used. Active engagement, such as communicating with friends and participating in supportive communities, may improve wellbeing, whereas passive scrolling and excessive comparison with others may increase psychological distress (Valkenburg, Meier and Beyens, 2022). Therefore, developmental and psychological factors must be considered to understand why some adolescents are more vulnerable to negative experiences online.

Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory, developed by Bowlby (1969), proposes that early relationships with caregivers shape emotional development and influence social relationships throughout life. Secure attachment develops when caregivers provide consistent emotional support, leading to greater self-esteem, emotional regulation and resilience. In contrast, insecure attachment may result from inconsistent or unresponsive caregiving, increasing vulnerability to anxiety, low self-worth and difficulties in relationships.

Attachment Theory can help explain why adolescents respond differently to social media. Young people with secure attachment are more likely to possess confidence and healthy coping strategies, making them less dependent on online approval. In contrast, adolescents with insecure attachment may seek reassurance through likes, comments and followers as a way of

gaining validation. Consequently, negative online experiences such as exclusion, criticism or cyberbullying may have a stronger emotional impact on these individuals.

Research supports this explanation. Oldmeadow, Quinn and Kowert (2013) found that individuals with insecure attachment styles were more likely to engage in problematic social media use and depend on online interactions for emotional support. Adolescents who rely heavily on external validation may experience increased anxiety when online expectations are not met. For example, receiving fewer likes or being excluded from online groups may reinforce feelings of rejection and negatively affect self-esteem.

Attachment Theory also suggests that positive relationships can protect against the negative effects of social media. Adolescents who experience supportive family relationships are more likely to discuss online problems, seek advice and manage emotional difficulties effectively. Therefore, early attachment experiences play an important role in determining how adolescents interpret and respond to social media interactions.

Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory

Erikson (1968) proposed that adolescence is characterised by the psychosocial stage of identity versus role confusion. During this period, young people attempt to establish a stable sense of identity by exploring values, beliefs and social roles. Peer relationships become increasingly important, and acceptance from others contributes significantly to self-esteem and psychological wellbeing.

Social media provides adolescents with opportunities for identity exploration through profiles, photographs and online communication. Positive experiences may encourage creativity, self-expression and social connectedness. Adolescents can experiment with different aspects of identity and receive support from peers with similar interests. For some individuals, online communities may provide a valuable sense of belonging.

However, social media can also create challenges during identity development. Constant exposure to idealised lifestyles and edited images may encourage unrealistic comparisons and contribute to feelings of inadequacy. According to Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory, individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their appearance, achievements and social status with others. Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to these comparisons because they are still developing their identities and self-esteem.

As a result, excessive comparison on social media may lead to body dissatisfaction, reduced confidence and symptoms of anxiety and depression (Valkenburg, Meier and Beyens, 2022). Erikson's theory therefore helps explain why adolescents place considerable importance on online feedback. Positive comments and peer approval may strengthen self-esteem, whereas criticism or exclusion may contribute to role confusion and emotional distress.

Critical Discussion

Although there is substantial evidence linking social media use with poorer mental health, it is important to recognise that this relationship is not straightforward. Social media is not inherently harmful; instead, the impact depends on how adolescents use these platforms and the personal characteristics they bring to their online experiences. Moderate use that encourages communication, learning and emotional support can have positive effects on wellbeing, whereas excessive use, passive scrolling and exposure to harmful content are associated with increased levels of anxiety, depression and low self-esteem (Keles, McCrae and Grealish, 2020). This suggests that individual differences, family relationships and developmental stage all influence how social media affects mental health.

One explanation for the negative impact of social media is social comparison. Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory argues that individuals naturally compare themselves with others when evaluating their own abilities, appearance and achievements. On social media, adolescents are frequently exposed to carefully edited photographs, idealised lifestyles and images that do not accurately reflect reality. These comparisons often result in adolescents feeling that they are less attractive, less successful or less popular than their peers. Consequently, repeated upward social comparisons may contribute to body dissatisfaction, reduced self-esteem and symptoms of anxiety and depression (Valkenburg, Meier and Beyens, 2022). This process supports Erikson's theory because adolescents are actively developing their identities and are particularly sensitive to peer evaluation and acceptance.

Attachment Theory also provides an explanation for why some adolescents are more affected by social comparison than others. Securely attached adolescents generally possess higher levels of self-confidence and emotional resilience, making them less reliant on social media for reassurance. In contrast, those with insecure attachment styles may seek constant validation through likes, comments and followers. When this validation is absent, or when they experience criticism or rejection online, they are more likely to experience emotional distress. Therefore, attachment security acts as an important protective factor against the negative psychological effects of social media.

Both Attachment Theory and Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory offer valuable explanations for adolescent mental health, although they focus on different aspects of development. Attachment Theory emphasises the importance of early childhood experiences and suggests that secure caregiver relationships provide the emotional foundation needed for healthy social interactions later in life (Bowlby, 1969). Erikson's theory, on the other hand, focuses on adolescence as a unique developmental stage in which individuals establish their identities through exploration and peer relationships (Erikson, 1968).

The two theories complement one another because they explain different reasons why adolescents may experience poor mental health following social media use. Attachment Theory explains why some young people are more emotionally vulnerable to cyberbullying, online rejection and the need for validation. Erikson's theory explains why adolescents generally place greater importance on peer feedback than other age groups because identity formation depends heavily on social acceptance. Together, these theories provide a broader understanding of why

social media affects adolescents differently rather than assuming that all young people experience the same outcomes.

However, both theories also have limitations. Attachment Theory has been criticised for placing considerable emphasis on early childhood experiences while underestimating later environmental influences, including friendships, schools, family changes and cultural factors. Many adolescents with insecure attachment do not develop mental health problems, suggesting that resilience and supportive relationships later in life can reduce risk (Cassidy and Shaver, 2016). Likewise, Erikson's theory has been criticised for presenting development in fixed stages, whereas identity formation is now understood to continue throughout adulthood and to be influenced by changing social and technological environments.

Furthermore, neither theory was developed during the digital age and therefore neither specifically considers the impact of algorithms, influencer culture or the constant accessibility of social media. Modern platforms expose adolescents to a continuous stream of personalised content that can reinforce appearance ideals, increase social comparison and encourage excessive screen time. As a result, contemporary research is needed alongside these developmental theories to fully understand the relationship between social media and adolescent mental health.

Overall, the evidence indicates that social media has both positive and negative effects on adolescent wellbeing. Positive experiences include increased social support, opportunities for identity exploration and access to mental health information. Negative experiences include cyberbullying, unrealistic social comparisons, body dissatisfaction, anxiety and depression. Whether adolescents experience positive or negative outcomes depends on a combination of their developmental stage, attachment security, patterns of social media use and the availability of supportive relationships in their offline lives.

Conclusion

Social media has become a significant influence on adolescent mental health because it shapes how young people communicate, develop relationships and form their identities. While social media provides opportunities for social connection, self-expression and access to support, excessive or problematic use has been associated with anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction and sleep disturbances. Research suggests that these outcomes are influenced not only by the amount of time spent online but also by the quality of online experiences and individual differences.

Attachment Theory explains that adolescents with secure attachments are generally more emotionally resilient and less dependent on online validation, whereas those with insecure attachment styles may be more vulnerable to the effects of cyberbullying, rejection and social comparison. Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory further explains why adolescence is a particularly sensitive period, as young people are developing their identities and place considerable importance on peer acceptance and social approval. Together, these theories

demonstrate that social media interacts with developmental processes to influence psychological wellbeing.

Overall, the impact of social media on adolescent mental health is complex and cannot be described as entirely positive or entirely negative. Instead, the effects depend on how social media is used, the emotional resilience of the individual and the support available from family, friends and schools. Promoting healthy online behaviours, encouraging digital literacy and strengthening supportive relationships may help adolescents gain the benefits of social media while reducing its potential risks.

Reference List

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