



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Student Name	Isabel Portulez
Student Number	2510869
Module Title	Psychology in Health and Social Care
Module Code	LCHS4010
Assignment Title	Component 2: The impact of social media on mental health in adolescents
Lecturer's Name	Odette Jack

Social media has become a normal part of everyday life for many adolescents. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook and X allow young people to communicate, maintain friendships, share experiences and express themselves. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) describe social media as applications that enable the creation and exchange of user-generated content. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines adolescence as the period from 10 to 19 years, a stage marked by rapid physical, cognitive, social and emotional development (World Health Organization, 2024). Mental health concerns a person's psychological and social wellbeing and their ability to cope with everyday demands (World Health Organization, 2025). This makes the topic important because experiences during adolescence can shape longer-term wellbeing. Social media can provide connection, belonging and support, but it can also expose young people to social comparison, cyberbullying and pressures around appearance and popularity. This essay examines these contrasting effects through Erikson's psychosocial theory and Bandura's Social Learning Theory, before evaluating and comparing how well the two theories explain the relationship between social media and adolescent mental health.

Research does not support a simple conclusion that social media is either harmful or beneficial to adolescent mental health. Keles, McCrae and Grealish (2020) found associations between social media use and depression, anxiety and psychological distress, but their review also highlights an important limitation: most of the studies included were cross-sectional. Therefore, the findings show relationships rather than proving that social media causes poor mental health. Odgers and Jensen (2020) similarly argue that the evidence is mixed, with small positive, negative and null associations. This is important because an adolescent who is already anxious or experiencing low mood may turn to social media more often, rather than social media being the original cause of the difficulty. Some experiences nevertheless appear particularly relevant. Appearance-focused content can encourage upward comparison, and research has consistently linked social media use with body-image concerns (Fardouly and Vartanian, 2016). Night-time use can also interfere with sleep, which is associated with poorer psychological wellbeing (Scott and Woods, 2019). At the same time, online communication can maintain friendships, create communities and provide emotional support, especially for young people who feel isolated offline (Best, Manktelow and Taylor, 2014). The effects are therefore likely to depend on what adolescents do online, the content they encounter and

their existing circumstances. This variation is important when applying psychological theories.

Erikson's psychosocial theory is particularly useful because it places adolescence within the stage of identity versus role confusion. Erikson (1968) argued that young people need to explore values, beliefs, relationships and possible future roles in order to develop a coherent sense of identity. Social media now forms part of the social environment in which this exploration occurs. An adolescent can experiment with interests, opinions and forms of self-presentation online, receive feedback from peers and find communities that share their experiences. For someone who feels excluded offline, this can provide belonging and reassurance. From an Eriksonian perspective, positive online relationships may therefore support identity development rather than simply represent a risk to mental health. Contemporary research also recognizes social media as an environment in which adolescents can explore and construct aspects of identity, making Erikson particularly relevant to the digital context.

However, the same search for social recognition can become problematic. Adolescents may attach considerable importance to likes, comments, followers and other forms of visible approval because these provide immediate feedback about how they are perceived. If an adolescent repeatedly compares their appearance or lifestyle with idealized online representations, social media may turn identity exploration into a continual assessment of self-worth. Fardouly and Vartanian (2016) identify appearance comparison as an important factor in the relationship between social media and body-image concerns, while Valkenburg, Meier and Beyens (2022) conclude that associations between social media and adolescent mental health are generally weak or inconsistent rather than uniformly harmful. This distinction strengthens the application of Erikson: social media may create an environment in which identity development is negotiated, but the outcome is not predetermined.

A strength of Erikson's theory is that it explains why adolescents may be especially sensitive to peer feedback and social acceptance. It also allows positive and negative experiences to be understood within the same developmental process. However, the theory was developed before digital platforms existed and therefore cannot explain features such as algorithms, personalized feeds or the commercial incentives behind platform design. It also gives limited attention to why two adolescents exposed to similar content may respond differently. Erikson is consequently more convincing in explaining

why identity-related experiences matter during adolescence than in explaining the specific mechanisms through which social-media behaviours spread.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory offers a different explanation by focusing on how behaviour is learned through observation, imitation and the consequences attached to behaviour. Bandura (1977) proposed that people are more likely to reproduce behaviour when they observe a model receiving desirable outcomes. Social media provides a particularly visible environment for this process. Adolescents can observe peers, celebrities and influencers and immediately see the attention their behaviour receives through likes, comments, shares and followers. A model who appears attractive, successful or popular may therefore have considerable influence, especially when the behaviour being displayed seems to be rewarded.

This can help explain why idealized appearance standards and online trends can affect young people. An adolescent may observe an influencer receiving positive attention for a particular body shape, style or lifestyle and begin to imitate aspects of it. If the adolescent then receives approval from peers, the behaviour may be reinforced. Bandura's theory can also help explain harmful behaviours such as cyberbullying or risky challenges when attention and popularity function as rewards. However, social learning can work in a positive direction as well. Adolescents may observe people discussing mental health openly, modelling healthy coping strategies or encouraging others to seek help. Best, Manktelow and Taylor (2014) found that online communication can provide opportunities for social connection and support, suggesting that digital environments can expose young people to constructive as well as harmful models.

The strength of Bandura's theory is its ability to explain how social-media environments can make modelling and reinforcement unusually visible and immediate. It therefore adds something that Erikson does not: a clearer explanation of how particular behaviours and attitudes can be acquired. Nevertheless, Bandura also has limitations. Observing a behaviour does not guarantee that an adolescent will copy it, and the theory gives less attention to developmental identity, emotional vulnerability and wider social circumstances. It can explain how an influencer becomes a model but does not fully explain why that particular influencer matters more to one adolescent than another. The theory therefore needs to be considered alongside a developmental explanation.

Comparing the two theories shows that their greatest value lies in what they contribute to different parts of the same process. Erikson focuses on the adolescent's developing sense of self, making it particularly useful for understanding the importance of peer approval, identity exploration and self-esteem. Bandura focuses on the learning process, making it more useful for explaining why influencers, peers and online trends can shape attitudes and behaviours. For example, Erikson can explain why an adolescent may care deeply about whether an online audience approves of their appearance, while Bandura explains how observing popular appearance standards and their rewards can encourage imitation. The theories therefore complement each other rather than simply offering competing explanations.

Neither theory, however, is sufficient on its own. Erikson does not explain the detailed mechanisms of online modelling and reinforcement, while Bandura does not fully explain why adolescence creates particular sensitivity around identity and belonging. Both theories also pre-date contemporary social media, so neither account adequately for algorithmic recommendation systems, personalized content or platform design. Wider factors such as family relationships, existing mental health, resilience and digital literacy also shape outcomes (Odgers and Jensen, 2020). Overall, Erikson is stronger for explaining the developmental significance of identity and social approval, while Bandura is stronger for explaining how online models and reinforcement can influence behaviour. Used together, they provide a more convincing explanation because they connect adolescents' developmental needs with the social-learning processes operating within digital environments.

Overall, social media has a complex influence on adolescent mental health rather than a uniformly positive or negative one. It can strengthen relationships, provide belonging and expose young people to supportive communities and positive role models. At the same time, social comparison, appearance pressures, cyberbullying, disrupted sleep and reinforcement of harmful behaviours can undermine wellbeing. The evidence should nevertheless be interpreted cautiously because much of the research identifies associations rather than clear causal effects. Erikson's theory helps explain why adolescents may be particularly sensitive to identity, peer approval and social acceptance, while Bandura explains how behaviours and attitudes can be learned through online models and reinforcement. Neither theory fully captures the modern digital environment, but together they offer a stronger account than either provides separately. The most

convincing conclusion is therefore that social media does not have a single predictable effect on adolescents: its influence depends on the type of engagement, the online experiences involved and the personal and social resources available to the young person.

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