



Student Name: Inna Valier

Student ID: 2517108

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Lecturer: Odette Jack

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Online social platforms have fundamentally redefined how human beings exchange information, maintain interpersonal relationships, and build virtual communities in modern society.

Adolescence, which the World Health Organization defines as the crucial developmental period occurring between ages 10 and 19, involves major neurological, emotional, and social transitions. Within the professional domain of health and social care, mental health is understood not merely as the absence of mental illness, but as a broad continuum of emotional stability, psychological well-being, and social functioning. This continuum directly determines how young individuals manage life stressors, develop a coherent sense of self-identity, and form meaningful social connections. Because mobile applications and digital networking spaces are deeply embedded in youth culture, evaluating their psychological consequences has become an urgent priority for care practitioners. Digital technology has fundamentally altered standard developmental milestones, making rigorous theoretical analysis essential. This essay critically examines both the positive and negative effects of networking platforms on young people's mental health using Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and John Bowlby's Attachment Theory. Furthermore, it explores the broader relevance of these two theoretical frameworks when supporting older adult service users within health and social care settings across the lifespan.

Current empirical research demonstrates that digital environments produce complex, contrasting outcomes for youth psychological well-being. On a positive note, online networks allow geographically isolated, minority, or marginalized teenagers to locate supportive peer groups, express their unique identities, and construct a genuine sense of social belonging (Best, Manktelow and Taylor, 2014). Virtual support groups and digital communities frequently provide effective coping mechanisms and empathetic connections that young people might lack in their immediate physical or domestic environments (O'Reilly et al., 2018). On the other hand, continuous exposure to highly curated, idealised lifestyles on social feeds often fuels harmful social comparison processes, resulting in acute body dissatisfaction, chronic anxiety, and significantly lowered self-esteem (Vogel et al., 2014; Royal Society for Public Health, 2017). Late-night screen exposure and online harassment or cyberbullying regularly disrupt healthy sleep architecture and exacerbate emotional volatility among vulnerable adolescents (Woods and Scott, 2016). Furthermore, sophisticated platform algorithms engineered specifically for continuous user engagement encourage compulsive checking habits, which heightens overall psychological vulnerability (Twenge and Campbell, 2018). However, these psychological

impacts vary widely between individuals depending on their pre-existing coping strategies, personal emotional resilience, and specific digital consumption habits.

Empirical studies demonstrate a clear, statistically significant connection between excessive screen time, deep digital immersion, and rising rates of clinical anxiety, depressive symptoms, and emotional dysregulation among contemporary adolescents (Twenge and Campbell, 2018). Unlike previous generations who experienced distinct boundaries between school and home life, modern youth process their daily existence through a constantly connected digital lens. This continuous online presence blurs the boundaries between real-life physical experiences and virtual interactions, leading to noticeable cognitive, affective, and behavioral alterations. When teenagers allocate excessive hours to gamified digital applications, their face-to-face social contact drops significantly. Consequently, adolescents gradually internalize the artificial communication norms of digital spaces—where interpersonal conflicts can be ended instantly by blocking an individual and actions rarely carry immediate real-world consequences—and mistakenly attempt to apply these distorted expectations to physical social interactions.

Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory provides an essential theoretical framework for understanding how digital environments reshape cognitive growth and social learning during youth. Vygotsky argued that human cognition develops through active interaction with cultural tools and mediated learning processes within specific socio-historical contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). In contemporary society, complex algorithms, interactive interfaces, and social media platforms function as primary cultural tools that actively mediate adolescent perception and cognition. When virtual interaction channels replace organic, face-to-face social interaction, the fundamental mechanisms through which young people internalize cultural norms and social rules become distorted. In digital environments, social failure or interpersonal rejection can be instantly erased or undone, instilling an unrealistic expectation of immediate recovery. As a result, teenagers experience profound cognitive friction when confronted with the permanent, undatable nature of real-life social consequences. Additionally, Vygotsky emphasized the critical role of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), wherein cognitive advancement is guided by More Knowledgeable Others (MKOs) such as mentors, parents, or teachers (Vygotsky, 1978). While adult caregivers traditionally fulfilled this developmental role, automated algorithms and online influencers now function as surrogate MKOs, broadcasting unrealistic beauty standards, consumerist values, and superficial social norms that weaken emotional resilience. A key

strength of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory is that it captures how digital tools actively shape adolescent thinking and behavior, rather than treating young people as passive recipients of technology (Vygotsky, 1978). However, the theory was developed before the existence of digital media and therefore does not fully account for the emotional and biological dimensions of adolescent vulnerability online, nor does it explain why some young people are more resilient to these cultural influences than others.

To better comprehend the deep emotional distress and behavioral compulsions observed in digitally connected youth, John Bowlby's Attachment Theory offers invaluable psychological insights. Bowlby (1969) posited that human beings possess an innate, evolutionary drive to form secure emotional bonds with primary caregivers, using these attachment figures as a safe base from which to explore the surrounding environment. In today's hyper-connected landscape, mobile smart devices and social networking accounts frequently function as primary substitute attachment objects (Twenge, 2017). Instead of turning to family members or face-to-face friendships for emotional co-regulation, adolescents increasingly rely on digital interfaces to regulate internal distress and manage acute stress. When experiencing loneliness, anxiety, or emotional overload, young people habitually seek instantaneous validation and emotional reassurance through online platforms rather than seeking real-world interpersonal support systems.

This continuous emotional reliance frequently evolves into a powerful psychological attachment to the physical device and its online network. Consequently, when parents, educators, or guardians restrict smartphone access or enforce digital breaks, teenagers regularly manifest severe emotional distress, including intense panic, acute hostility, and behavioral outbursts. From an attachment perspective, this extreme reaction closely mirrors the separation anxiety originally documented by Bowlby (1973) when an infant is abruptly separated from their primary caregiver. The smartphone effectively becomes an indispensable emotional soothing tool; confiscating or losing the device deprives the adolescent of their primary mechanism for affect regulation, triggering severe distress. Furthermore, because online validation is highly conditional, unpredictable, and short-lived—relying heavily on quantifiable metrics such as likes, shares, and views—adolescents risk developing anxious or insecure internal working models regarding peer relationships (Midgley et al., 2021). This insecure orientation heightens social

fears, chronic worries over social exclusion, and a constant, exhausting need for peer acceptance. A significant strength of Bowlby's Attachment Theory is that it offers a compelling psychological explanation for the intense emotional reactions adolescents display when separated from their devices, framing this as an extension of an innate biological need for security (Bowlby, 1969). A key limitation, however, is that the theory was originally formulated to explain infant–caregiver bonds and may oversimplify adolescent digital dependency, which is also shaped by social, cultural, and cognitive factors that attachment theory alone does not address.

Comparing Vygotsky's and Bowlby's conceptual frameworks highlights distinct yet highly complementary perspectives on digital behavior within health and social care. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory focuses primarily on cognitive developmental processes, social learning environments, and the structural ways social media acts as a cultural mediation tool. Conversely, Bowlby's Attachment Theory concentrates on emotional security, internal affective structures, and the functional role of digital devices as surrogate attachment figures. While Vygotsky explains how software algorithms and digital spaces alter cognitive scaffolding and social understanding, Bowlby explains why adolescents experience profound emotional dysregulation and separation panic when removed from their digital environments. Integrating both theoretical perspectives equips health and social care practitioners with a comprehensive diagnostic lens: adolescent vulnerability online is neither purely cognitive nor strictly emotional, but rather a complex synthesis of altered cognitive mediation and insecure attachment dynamics.

Applying these developmental frameworks to older adult service user populations further demonstrates their critical utility across the entire lifespan within social care practice. In later adulthood, digital technologies can play a transformative role in reducing social isolation, maintaining cognitive vitality, and facilitating access to essential health care services (Gould, 2021; Czaja et al., 2018). Interpreted through Vygotsky's sociocultural lens, digital communication platforms serve as essential modern cultural tools that empower older individuals to preserve their social networks, stimulate cognitive functioning, and maintain personal autonomy despite physical constraints (Hepburn et al., 2020). Simultaneously, Bowlby's attachment perspective clarifies how digital connections offer older service users emotional continuity, comfort, and security during major life transitions, such as retirement, bereavement, or age-related health decline (Fang et al., 2019). Recognizing these lifespan

patterns enables health and social care professionals to design inclusive, emotionally supportive digital literacy programs tailored to service users at every stage of development.

In conclusion, social media platforms exert a profound, dual-edged influence on adolescent mental health, offering valuable opportunities for community connection and self-expression while simultaneously elevating the risks of anxiety disorders, low self-esteem, sleep deprivation, and emotional instability. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory effectively demonstrates how digital interfaces act as influential cultural tools that alter cognitive scaffolding and social learning, whereas Bowlby's Attachment Theory illustrates how mobile devices become surrogate attachment objects providing precarious emotional reassurance. Furthermore, applying these theoretical models to older adult populations confirms that digital tools can support psychological well-being and social connection throughout the life course. Health and social care workers must adopt an integrated theoretical approach to foster digital well-being, mitigate online risks, and encourage healthy digital habits across all age groups.

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