

ESSAY

Discuss the impact of social media on mental health in adolescence

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Social media is now a normal part of teenage life and most young people have at minimum one account through popular social media apps (Agyapong-Opoku, Agyapong-Opoku and Greenshaw, 2025). Meanwhile, adolescence is a period of many physical, mental and social changes. Teenagers are more affected by what other people think about them and look for approval from their friends (Somerville, 2013, cited in Agyapong-Opoku, Agyapong-Opoku and Greenshaw, 2025). So spending a lot of time on social media increases the risk of problems such as depression, anxiety and low trust in themselves (Khalaf et al., 2023). This essay will use Erikson's theory of identity against role confusion and Freud's theory of psychosexual development to explain how social media can affect the mental health of teenagers.

Exploration on social media and teenage mental health has found mixed results. Many studies show that spending more time on social media is associated to higher levels of depression and anxiety in teenagers, even if the link is usually small (Khalaf et al., 2023; Saleem, Young and Yousuf, 2024). One review found that the link is stronger on apps that focus on photos and videos, especially when teenagers spend time scrolling through posts and comparing themselves with others instead of talking to friends (Draženović, Vukušić Rukavina and Machala Poplašen, 2023). Experts believe this may happen because teenagers see unrealistic or edited pictures, experience cyberbullying, lose sleep from using their phones late at night, or worry about missing out on activities that others share online (Agyapong-Opoku, Agyapong-Opoku and Greenshaw, 2025).

But research also shows that social media can have helpful effects. It can help teenagers make friends, get support from others, explore who they are and connect with people who have similar interests, especially if they feel lonely in real life (Draženović, Vukušić Rukavina and Machala Poplašen, 2023). Another review found that mental health problems were more common among teenagers who used social media for more than three hours a day and those who frequently compared their appearance or lifestyle with other people online (Saleem, Young and Yousuf, 2024). Overall, this shows that social media does not affect every teenager in the same way. Its effect depends on how and why it is used and psychological theories can help explain why some teenagers are affected more than others.

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development explains why social media can affect teenager's mental health. Erikson (1968) believed that adolescence is a time when young people try to discover who they are and where they belong. If they understand who they are, they become more confident and are better able to build strong relationships. If they do not, they may feel unsure about themselves and their place in the world.

Today, social media is one of the main places where teenagers explore their identity. It allows them to share their interests, express themselves and connect with different groups of people (Agyapong-Opoku, Agyapong-Opoku and Greenshaw, 2025). This can be helpful because it gives teenagers a opportunity to build confidence and find support from others. However, social media also encourages teenagers to compare themselves with the carefully edited and idealised posts of others. If they do

not receive enough likes, comments, or followers, they may feel that they are not accepted or valued. This can make them feel anxious, confused and less confident.

Erikson's theory helps explain why teenagers who spend a lot of time on social media are more likely to experience feelings of less confidence and symptoms of depression (Khalaf et al., 2023). The main problem is not social media itself, but the way it increases comparison with others while teenagers are still trying to understand themselves

Freud's psychosexual theory gives another way of understanding how social media can affect teenagers. Freud believed that adolescence is the genital stage of development. During this stage, romantic and sexual feelings become stronger and teenagers must learn to control their thoughts and behaviour. According to Freud, the id wants immediate pleasure, the sense of right and wrong follows moral rules and values and the ego helps balance the two (Kaur, Lantz and Ray, 2025). A strong ego helps teenagers make decisions, but if this balance is weak, they may feel anxious or find it difficult to control their behaviour.

Social media can make it more difficult to stay balanced. Teenagers see edited photos and perfect lifestyles online, which can make them believe they need to look or live the same way. If they cannot meet these unrealistic standards, they may feel unhappy with their appearance or feel guilty and ashamed. At the same time, likes, notifications and endless scrolling give quick rewards, which appeal to the id's desire for immediate pleasure. This can make social media difficult to stop using and may lead to unhealthy habits that are linked to poorer mental health (Khalaf et al., 2023).

Freud's theory shows that social media can struggle between wanting instant rewards and trying to meet social expectations while teenagers are still developing self control (Kaur, Lantz and Ray, 2025).

Of the two theories, Erikson's theory of identity against role confusion is more useful for understanding how social media affects teenager's mental health in health and social care. This is because it focuses on how young people develop their identity through their relationships, friendships and experiences in society. This fits well with social media, where teenagers act together with others and compare themselves with their friends. Modern research also supports Erikson's theory by showing that social media affects teenagers' identity, self-esteem and how they see themselves (Agyapong-Opoku, Agyapong-Opoku and Greenshaw, 2025). This gives the theory stronger support than Freud's theory.

However, Erikson's theory does not explain everything. It suggests that development happens in fixed stages, but in today's online world, teenagers may show different parts of their identity on different social media platforms. The theory also does not fully explain why some teenagers are affected by social media more than others.

Even with these limitations, Erikson's theory is still useful because it helps health and social care workers understand why teenagers care so much about their online lives. It also explains why experiences such as comparing themselves with others online can have a strong effect on their

mental health. Another limitation is that Erikson created his theory before social media existed. Although it can still be used to understand today's online world (Agyapong-Opoku, Agyapong-Opoku and Greenshaw, 2025), it was not designed for a world where people are always connected through social media. Experts should remember this when using the theory. Freud's theory also has limitations because it has less research evidence to support it and was developed long before social media, making it less suitable for explaining teenager's experiences online today.

In conclusion, Erikson's and Freud's theories both help explain how social media can affect teenager's mental health. Erikson's theory shows that social media has become an important place where teenagers try to discover who they are. Positive experiences online can help them build confidence and develop their identity, whereas negative experiences, such as comparing themselves with others or seeking approval through likes and comments, can lead to confusion, low and depression.

Freud's theory provides another explanation. It suggests that social media encourages the desire for quick rewards, such as likes and notifications, while also creating pressure to meet unrealistic standards. This can make teenagers feel anxious and make it harder for them to control their social media use.

Together, these theories show that teenagers are not only affected by social media itself, but also by the important changes they experience as they grow up. This is important for health and social care because understanding why teenagers use social media and how it affects their development can help professionals provide better support for their mental health.

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