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The Impact of Social Media on Mental Health in Adolescence

Introduction:

Adolescence is a critical developmental period characterised by rapid biological, cognitive, and social changes. During this stage, young people increasingly seek autonomy, develop identity, and rely heavily on peer relationships. Social media has become deeply embedded in this developmental landscape, with platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and WhatsApp forming part of adolescents' everyday social interactions. While these platforms offer opportunities for connection and self-expression, research increasingly suggests that social media use can also negatively affect adolescent mental health. Studies have linked excessive or problematic use to anxiety, depression, poor self-esteem, and difficulties with emotional regulation (Keles et al., 2020). Understanding why adolescents may be particularly vulnerable requires drawing on developmental theories that explain their psychological needs and behaviours. This essay will explore the impact of social media on adolescent mental health through the lens of **Erikson's psychosocial theory** and **Bowlby's attachment theory**, demonstrating how these frameworks help explain both the risks and potential benefits of social media exposure

Social media can influence adolescents' mental health in several ways. One of the most widely discussed issues is the relationship between social media use and symptoms of anxiety and depression. Research has found that frequent engagement with social media, particularly platforms that emphasise appearance and social comparison, is associated with increased depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem (Fardouly et al., 2015). Adolescents often compare their lives to idealised images on social media, which can create feelings of inadequacy or pressure to meet unrealistic standards in life. Additionally, cyberbullying has emerged as a significant concern, with online harassment linked to heightened levels of psychological distress (Nixon, 2014). The constant attachment on social media also means adolescents may struggle to disengage from peer evaluation, leading to sleep disruption and emotional exhaustion.

These issues emphasize the complex interaction between social media environments and adolescent developmental needs.

Erikson's psychosocial theory explains a useful framework for understanding why adolescents may be particularly sensitive to social media influences. According to Erikson, adolescence is defined by the stage of *identity versus role confusion*, during which individuals seek to establish a coherent sense of self (Erikson, 1968). Social media platforms offer spaces where adolescents can experiment with identity, explore interests, and receive comments and likes from peers. This can support identity development when interactions are positive, allowing adolescents to feel validated and connected. However, Erikson highlights that identity formation is fragile during this stage, and negative comments or social rejection can contribute to confusion and insecurity. Social media amplifies these risks by exposing adolescents to constant peer evaluation, often in the form of likes, comments, and follower counts. When adolescents rely heavily on online validation, their sense of identity may become contingent on external approval, increasing vulnerability to anxiety and low self-worth.

Furthermore, Erikson's theory highlights the importance of social relationships during adolescence. Peer acceptance becomes a central developmental task, and social media can intensify the pressure to conform to group norms. Adolescents may feel compelled to present idealised versions of themselves online to gain approval, which can create internal conflict between authentic identity and perceived expectations. This tension may contribute to emotional distress, particularly if adolescents feel they cannot live up to the persona they project online. Research suggests that adolescents who engage in frequent social comparison on social media report higher levels of depressive symptoms (Vogel et al., 2014), supporting Erikson's view that identity development is shaped by social comments. Social media therefore acts as both a tool for identity exploration and a potential source of psychological strain.

Bowlby's attachment theory also offers valuable insight into how social media affects adolescent mental health. Bowlby argued that early attachment relationships shape individuals' expectations of social interactions and influence emotional regulation throughout life (Bowlby, 1969). Adolescents with secure attachment styles typically feel confident in relationships and are better able to manage emotional challenges. For these individuals, social media may serve as an additional means of maintaining supportive connections with peers and family. Securely attached adolescents may use social media in balanced ways, benefiting from the sense of belonging it can provide.

In contrast, adolescents with insecure attachment styles may be more vulnerable to negative mental health outcomes associated with social media use. Those with anxious attachment may seek constant reassurance and validation online, becoming

preoccupied with how others perceive them. Social media's feedback mechanisms can reinforce this anxiety, as adolescents may repeatedly check for likes or comments to soothe feelings of insecurity. This behaviour can lead to compulsive use and heightened emotional dependence on online interactions. Research has shown that individuals with insecure attachment styles are more likely to engage in problematic social media use and experience associated psychological difficulties (Blackwell et al., 2017). Bowlby's theory therefore helps explain why some adolescents may be more susceptible to the pressures of online environments.

Attachment theory also sheds light on the impact of cyberbullying. Adolescents with insecure attachment may struggle to cope with negative online interactions, interpreting them as confirmation of their fears about rejection or unworthiness. Cyberbullying can undermine their sense of safety in relationships, contributing to anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal. Conversely, securely attached adolescents may be better equipped to seek support and recover from negative experiences. Bowlby's emphasis on the role of early caregiving suggests that parental involvement and emotional support remain crucial during adolescence, particularly in helping young people navigate online challenges. Studies have found that adolescents who report strong parental support are less likely to experience negative mental health outcomes related to social media use (Frison & Eggermont, 2015), reinforcing the protective role of secure attachment.

While much research highlights the risks of social media, it is important to acknowledge that these platforms can also offer benefits for adolescent mental health. Social media can provide opportunities for connection, especially for adolescents who feel isolated offline. Online communities can offer support, validation, and a sense of belonging, which may be particularly valuable for young people exploring aspects of identity such as sexuality, culture, or interests. Erikson's theory suggests that such spaces can facilitate healthy identity development by allowing adolescents to express themselves and find like-minded peers. Similarly, attachment theory indicates that supportive online relationships can complement offline connections, helping adolescents feel emotionally secure. The impact of social media is therefore not universally negative; rather, it depends on how adolescents use these platforms and the quality of their online interactions.

Drawing together the insights from Erikson's psychosocial theory and Bowlby's attachment theory, it becomes clear that social media affects adolescent mental health through its influence on identity formation, social relationships, and emotional regulation. Adolescents are at a stage where they are highly sensitive to peer feedback and are actively constructing their sense of self. Social media amplifies these developmental processes, offering both opportunities for growth and risks for psychological distress. Those with insecure attachment styles may be particularly

vulnerable to negative outcomes, as they may rely heavily on online validation and struggle to cope with negative interactions. Conversely, adolescents with secure attachment and supportive offline relationships may navigate social media more positively, benefiting from the connection and self-expression it offers.

In conclusion,

Social media has a significant impact on adolescent mental health, shaped by developmental needs and psychological vulnerabilities. Erikson's theory highlights the role of identity formation and peer influence, explaining why social media can contribute to anxiety, depression, and self-esteem issues. Bowlby's attachment theory further illustrates how early relational patterns influence adolescents' responses to online interactions, with insecure attachment increasing exposure to negative outcomes. While social media can provide valuable opportunities for connection and support, its risks must be carefully managed. Encouraging healthy online habits, fostering secure relationships, and supporting adolescents' identity development can help mitigate negative effects and promote positive mental health outcomes. Ultimately, understanding social media through developmental theories allows for more effective support for adolescents as they navigate the complexities of digital life.

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