

Discuss the Impact of Social Media on Mental Health in Adolescence

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Adolescence is a developmental period marked by heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation, identity exploration, and emotional change, and it is precisely this period in which young people have become the heaviest users of social media. More than 90% of adolescents now hold at least one social media account (Kucharczuk et al., 2022, cited in a recent scoping review), and platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and YouTube dominate adolescent daily life (Khalaf et al., 2023). Alongside this rise in use, researchers, clinicians and policymakers have raised concerns about a parallel rise in adolescent anxiety, depression, body dissatisfaction and loneliness, with the US Surgeon General issuing a public health advisory on the relationship in 2023 (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). However, the evidence is not uniformly negative: social media also offers adolescents opportunities for connection, self-expression and support that were unavailable to previous generations. This essay will draw on Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and Bowlby's attachment theory to explain how and why adolescent mental health may be affected by exposure to social media platforms, arguing that the impact is best understood not as a simple cause-and-effect relationship, but as one shaped by the developmental tasks of identity formation and the relational patterns established earlier in life.

Research into social media and adolescent mental health consistently identifies both risks and benefits, though findings remain inconsistent in size and direction (Khalaf et al., 2023). On the negative side, studies point to social comparison, cyberbullying, sleep disruption and the pressure of maintaining an online persona as key mechanisms through which social media may undermine wellbeing (Khalaf et al., 2023; Blanchard et al., 2023). A meta-analysis of adolescent and young-adult studies found a significant, if modest, positive association between exposure to risk factors on social networks and various mental health disorders, while also highlighting that a notable proportion of adolescents who died by suicide had developed online identities centred on suicidal ideation, suggesting social media can, in some cases, intensify existing distress rather than simply reflect it (cited in recent systematic review evidence). On the positive side, the same body of research recognises that social media can provide peer support, a sense of belonging and opportunities for identity exploration that benefit adolescent wellbeing, particularly for marginalised or isolated young people (Blanchard et al., 2023). Reviews of the wider literature note that the constant availability of notifications and the expectation of immediate responses can create a near-perpetual state of alertness, disrupting sleep patterns and contributing to chronic stress, while algorithm-driven content feeds can intensify exposure to appearance-focused material linked to body dissatisfaction (Khalaf et al., 2023). At the same time, researchers repeatedly caution that the perception of harm is often shaped as much by adolescent and professional impressions of social media as by robust experimental evidence, and that much of the

research base remains cross-sectional, self-reported and difficult to generalise across platforms and age groups (Khalaf et al., 2023). This mixed picture suggests that the effect of social media on mental health depends less on the platforms themselves and more on how, why and by whom they are used, which is where developmental theory becomes useful in explaining the underlying psychological mechanisms.

Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development proposes that individuals pass through a series of stages, each characterised by a particular crisis that must be resolved for healthy development to continue. Adolescence corresponds to the fifth stage, identity versus role confusion, in which the central task is to develop a coherent and stable sense of self by exploring different roles, values and beliefs. Social media has become a primary arena in which this identity work now takes place. Pérez-Torres (2024) argues that social media functions as a "digital social mirror", offering adolescents a space for self-presentation, social comparison, exposure to role models, and interaction with an online audience, all of which map directly onto Erikson's concept of identity exploration. Through curating profiles, posting content and receiving feedback via likes and comments, adolescents experiment with different versions of themselves and receive continual, quantifiable social feedback on their identity choices. For some adolescents, this experimentation supports healthy identity development, allowing them to explore interests and communities they might not encounter offline. For others, however, the intensity and public nature of this feedback can foster role confusion rather than resolve it: constant social comparison with idealised peer and influencer content can undermine self-concept clarity and self-esteem, delaying the achievement of a stable identity and increasing vulnerability to anxiety and depressive symptoms (Pérez-Torres, 2024). Erikson's theory therefore helps explain why social media's impact on mental health is not uniform across adolescents, but depends on whether online identity exploration ultimately supports or destabilises the young person's developing sense of self.

Bowlby's attachment theory offers a complementary explanation, focused on relational rather than identity processes. Bowlby (1969) proposed that early bonds with caregivers create internal working models of relationships, shaping expectations of closeness, trust and support throughout life, and giving rise to broadly secure or insecure attachment styles. These early patterns do not disappear in adolescence; rather, they continue to shape how young people seek connection, security and reassurance, including in digital spaces. Research applying attachment theory to social media use has found that individuals with an anxious attachment style are significantly more likely to use social networking sites specifically to manage feelings of loneliness, seeking the reassurance and connection online that they may not consistently receive offline (Shorter, Turner and Mueller-Coyne, 2022). For

adolescents with insecure attachment histories, social media can become a compensatory space, offering opportunities for connection and validation, but it can also become a source of heightened anxiety when that reassurance is withdrawn or inconsistent, for example through unanswered messages, exclusion from group chats, or the ambiguity of online cues. Attachment theory therefore helps explain why some adolescents appear particularly vulnerable to the emotional volatility of online interaction: rather than social media itself being uniformly harmful, its effect is amplified for those whose underlying relational security is already fragile, while adolescents with more secure attachment histories may use the same platforms with less emotional cost.

Taken together, these two theories suggest that the debate over whether social media is "good" or "bad" for adolescent mental health may be mis framed. The research evidence itself reflects this uncertainty: findings are frequently correlational rather than causal, and effects appear to depend heavily on moderating factors such as the type of use (active versus passive), the individual's pre-existing psychological vulnerabilities, and the quality rather than quantity of online interaction (Blanchard et al., 2023). Erikson's theory reframes the question around identity: does a given pattern of use support or destabilise the adolescent's exploration of a coherent self? Bowlby's theory reframes it around relationships: does online interaction provide a secure base of connection, or does it expose and exacerbate existing attachment insecurities? Neither theory alone is sufficient: Erikson's model was developed decades before digital platforms existed and does not fully account for the algorithmic, quantified nature of modern online feedback, while Bowlby's framework was formulated around early caregiving bonds rather than peer interaction, and its extension to adolescent social media use remains a comparatively recent area of study with a smaller evidence base than the identity-focused literature. Used together, however, the two theories are usefully complementary, since they draw attention to different vulnerabilities within the same population, the still-forming sense of self on one hand, and the pre-existing relational security on the other, and this arguably offers a more complete explanation than either theory could provide in isolation. Viewed through both lenses, social media is neither inherently protective nor inherently harmful; it is a powerful, ever-present context in which the ordinary developmental tasks of adolescence, identity formation and relational security, are now substantially played out, for better or worse depending on the adolescent and the nature of their engagement.

In conclusion, the impact of social media on adolescent mental health cannot be reduced to a simple positive or negative verdict. The research literature demonstrates a genuinely mixed picture, with evidence of both harm, through social comparison, cyberbullying and disrupted sleep, and benefit, through peer support, connection and identity exploration.

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development helps explain this mixed picture by locating social media within the adolescent's central task of resolving identity versus role confusion, showing how online self-presentation and feedback can either support or undermine a stable sense of self. Bowlby's attachment theory adds a relational dimension, showing how pre-existing attachment security shapes the way adolescents use social media to seek connection and manage loneliness, and why those with insecure attachment histories may be more vulnerable to its emotional volatility. Together, these theories indicate that the impact of social media on adolescent mental health is best understood not as a fixed property of the technology itself, but as the product of an interaction between the platform and the developmental and relational needs of the young person using it.

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