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Discuss the Impact of Social Media on Mental Health in Adolescence

Social media has become an important part of adolescent life, shaping how young people communicate, form relationships, and understand themselves. Adolescents can use platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube to stay connected, express themselves, and find communities that share their interests. At the same time, they may expose young people to cyberbullying, unrealistic pictures, social comparison, and pressure to obtain approval. The effect differs with each adolescent. It is determined by how platforms are used, the content viewed, and the young person's emotional and social situation. This composition explores the beneficial and harmful effects of social media on teenage mental health using Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and Bowlby's attachment theory. It contends that the influence of social network is not always beneficial or harmful; it is determined by usage habits, developmental requirements, and the support provided offline.

Active social media use refers to direct participation on social media, such as sending messages, commenting, posting content, sharing information and interacting with online communities. When this form of use leads to meaningful contact, it can have a good impact. Adolescents may use social media to retain friendships, exchange experiences, and seek emotional support. Online groups can be especially beneficial for young people who feel isolated or struggle with in-person contact. When social media facilitates genuine relationships, it has the potential to improve belonging and minimise loneliness. According to Valkenburg, Meier, and Beyens (2022), the impacts of social media differ significantly amongst individuals, implying that positive results are more likely when online interactions are helpful and tailored to the young person's needs.

Erikson's theory of psychosocial improvement expound why social media can be useful through adolescence. Erikson (1968) defined adolescence as the stage of identity formation and uncertainty. At this period, young individuals consider their values, beliefs, relationships, and potential future responsibilities. Adolescents can use social media to share their interests, ideas, and creative work, which allows them to express themselves and explore their identities. Peer feedback may help some young people feel noticed and welcomed. However, the same procedure might result in pressure. When self-worth is dependent on likes, comments, or follower counts, adolescents may appraise themselves based on the emotions of others. If their posts attract less attention than anticipated, they may feel rejected, nervous, or unsure about their identity. As a result, while social media can help with identity formation, it can also lead to role confusion when young people believe they must exhibit an ideal version of themselves to be approved.

Passive social media use may have many concerns. Passive use includes browsing through posts, watching videos, and viewing profiles without engaging in meaningful conversation. Adolescents are frequently exposed to manipulated photos, idealised lifestyles, and selective achievements. This can lead to upward social comparison, which means comparing oneself with people who appear more successful, attractive, popular, or better off. In this situation, young people may compare themselves with idealised images of others. Keles, McCrae, and Grealish (2020) discovered a link between social media use and depression, anxiety, and psychological discomfort among adolescents. Although this study does not establish that social media directly causes mental health issues, it does suggest that frequent comparison and negative online experiences may exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities. Passive social media use may increase feelings of social isolation because adolescents observe the activities and relationships of others without participating in meaningful, reciprocal social interaction.

Another key thing to consider is content exposure. Social media may deliver instructional content, mental health advice, and positive messages about well-being. It may also expose teens to dangerous content, discrimination, and unrealistic body expectations. Girls may be especially affected by appearance-related comparisons, but boys may face pressure due to competition, status, or aggressive online behaviour (Twenge and Campbell, 2018). Social media algorithms may repeatedly recommend content based on users' previous viewing behaviour, which can increase adolescents' exposure to material that causes anxiety, dissatisfaction, or emotional distress. The fear of missing out can also drive teens to check notifications frequently and stay online late at night. This could disrupt sleep, concentration, and homework. Poor sleep can exacerbate emotional control, resulting in a vicious cycle in which social media use and bad mood reinforce one another.

Cyberbullying poses a significant risk since hurtful communications, public comments, exclusion from groups, and the sharing of embarrassing content can occur outside of school hours. Unlike traditional bullying, online harassment can reach a broad audience rapidly and may make teens believe that there is no haven from the problem. Repeated exposure to harmful online content may contribute to anxiety, loneliness, reduced self-confidence, and withdrawal from school or social activities. However, social media can make it easier to report abuse, save evidence, and seek help from trusted adults or professional agencies. The outcome is largely determined by adolescents' understanding of online safety rules and their ability to seek assistance. Families, schools, and health and social care providers should be aware of behavioural changes and create safe spaces for young people to communicate negative online experiences without fear of repercussions.

Bowlby's attachment theory offers another explanation for these effects. Bowlby (1969) contended that early interactions with carers shape how people perceive intimacy, security, and trust. During adolescence, young people increasingly gain independence and place a higher emphasis on friendship and peer interactions. Social media can help with this transition by providing regular contact with pals. For adolescents in stable relationships, internet communication may supplement face-to-face relationships and give an additional form of connection. However, adolescents who are afraid of rejection may rely excessively on messages, likes, and online answers for comfort. A delayed response or unanswered communication may be regarded as rejection, generating more distress than the circumstance warrants. When a young person relies on frequent digital reassurance, social media might reinforce nervous attachment patterns.

However, attachment theory cannot account for every adolescent's experience. Personality, familial circumstances, culture, socioeconomic status, and computer literacy all have an impact on social media behaviour. Odgers and Jensen (2020) caution against characterising all digital engagement as equally hazardous, as average impacts can mask significant disparities among young individuals. Some teens may benefit from online assistance, whilst others may be more susceptible to bullying, comparison, or obsessive use. Bowlby's theory is important since it emphasises emotional security and connection patterns; but, if applied alone, it may overemphasise early attachment. Erikson's theory also has limitations, as identity development varies between adolescents and is influenced by cultural background, gender, family environment, and wider social circumstances. Using both theories broadens the explanation, but neither provides a complete picture of digital activity.

The idea to limit social media access for youngsters under 16 underscores concerns about internet safety and mental health. Supporters may argue that a limitation will reduce exposure to dangerous information, cyberbullying, and features intended to encourage continuous use during a crucial developmental phase. However, complete restriction could mean losing access to supportive friendships, educational resources, and communities that help vulnerable teens feel understood. It may also be difficult to enforce, perhaps encouraging fake accounts. A balanced approach may combine age-appropriate safeguards, digital literacy education, parental involvement, and greater accountability from social media companies to minimise potential risks while maintaining the blessing of digital transmissions. This discussion demonstrates why health and social care providers should examine both protection and involvement rather than presuming that a single program will address all teenage requirements.

The impact of social media is also influenced by protective factors. Supportive family relationships, strong friendships, and school-based wellbeing programs can all help to lower some risk. Parents and carers can assist by talking about online experiences without instantly blaming or punishing the young person. Schools can educate digital literacy, such as how manipulated photos, algorithms, and advertising affect what people view. Health and social care experts should enquire about not only how many hours a teenager spends online, but also what they do, what content they consume, and how they feel afterwards. Focusing solely on-screen time may obscure whether the use is helpful, stressful, active, or passive. Interventions may improve emotional regulation, promote healthy sleep habits, strengthen offline relationships, and assist adolescents in setting realistic limits. These approaches understand that social media is an integral part of modern teenage life, and that support should minimise harm while keeping actual advantages.

Early detection is critical since adolescents may not openly admit that social media is harming their well-being. Practitioners should be aware of changes such as disrupted sleep, withdrawal, decreased confidence, worry, or declining academic performance. Conversations should remain non-judgemental, as immediately advising an adolescent to stop using social media may discourage open and honest communication. Instead, practitioners should explore which platforms are being used, how the young person feels before and after using them, and whether particular people or types of content are contributing to distress. This person-centred approach recognises that the same platform may be beneficial for one adolescent but harmful for another. It also highlights the importance of considering biological, psychological, family and environmental factors together, rather than viewing social media as the sole cause of poor mental health.

To summarise, social media has a multifaceted and context-dependent effect on teenage mental health. Active and supportive use can improve relationships, promote identity exploration, and offer emotional support. Passive scrolling, social comparison, cyberbullying, toxic content, and reliance on online approval can all lead to anxiety, low self-esteem, and psychological suffering. Erikson's theory discusses how social media might influence identity formation during identity and role confusion, whereas Bowlby's theory focuses on emotional stability and reassurance in online relationships. However, neither hypothesis adequately accounts for the impact of culture, family support, personality, and platform design. For health and social care practice, the best answer is not to presume that all social media use is dangerous. Professionals should evaluate the quality and purpose of use, identify specific vulnerabilities, and help teenagers acquire digital literacy, emotional resilience, and healthy online habits.

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