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Impact of Social Media on Mental Health During Adolescence

As social media is becoming a larger part of the daily lives of many adolescents, it is important to consider how social media impacts their mental health. Many adolescents use social media to interact with friends, post pictures and videos, follow other users and express themselves. Adolescent years are an important time because young people experience many physical, emotional and social changes.

In addition, adolescents are trying to understand who they are and where they fit into society. Due to these factors, interactions on social media may impact their mental health. Research has shown a connection between social media use and depression, anxiety, stress, poor sleep, low self-esteem and poor body image (Keles et al., 2020). However, social media can also provide opportunities for adolescents to stay connected with their friends, seek support from others and feel included within a community. This essay will examine the positive and negative effects of social media on adolescent mental health. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and Bowlby's attachment theory will be used to explain why social media affects adolescents differently.

Social media has been shown to influence adolescent mental health; however, the relationship is complex. Keles et al. (2020) identified a link between social media use and depression, anxiety and emotional distress in adolescents. However, this does not mean that social media always causes these issues. Odgers and Jensen (2020) state that digital technologies may affect each adolescent differently. For example, an adolescent who is already experiencing anxiety or depression may use social media more frequently because they are seeking connection or support. Shannon et al. (2022) also identified a link between problematic social media use and depression, anxiety and stress. Therefore, the way adolescents use social media may be more important than simply how much time they spend on it.

One major concern about social media is social comparison. Adolescents can easily compare their physical appearance, lifestyle, friendships and achievements with those of others. However, people usually show the most positive parts of their lives on social media. Images posted online may also be changed using filters or editing software. Adolescents may compare their normal daily lives with these idealised images and feel that they are not good enough. Social comparison can negatively affect their confidence and self-esteem. Kelly et al. (2019) conducted a study involving 10,904 fourteen-year-old adolescents in the United Kingdom and found that greater social media use was associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms. Poor sleep, online harassment, low self-esteem and poor body image were also important factors.

Another significant issue connected with social media is cyberbullying. Cyberbullying allows bullying to happen whether an adolescent is at school or at home. Hurtful messages, embarrassing images and negative comments posted on social media can quickly be shared with many people. Cyberbullying may cause adolescents to feel that there is no way to escape from the bullying. Adolescents may also experience poor sleep because they spend time checking messages, watching videos or waiting for responses. Poor sleep can negatively affect their mood and their ability to cope with stress. On the other hand, social media can also provide communication with supportive friends and opportunities to interact with people who have similar interests and experiences.

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development can help explain why social media may have a strong influence on adolescents. Erikson (1968) believed that individuals go through different stages of development. The main developmental stage during adolescence is known as identity versus role confusion. Adolescents are trying to understand who they are, what they believe and where they fit into society. They may explore their physical appearance, relationships, interests, hobbies and future goals. Branje et al. (2021) explain that developing an identity is an important part of adolescence.

Social media can help adolescents explore their identity. They can follow people with similar interests and hobbies, take part in online communities and learn about different lifestyles and ideas. Adolescents can also express themselves through images, videos and posts. Avci et al. (2025) reported that active social media use was connected with identity exploration. They also found that being honest about oneself on social media was connected with having a clearer understanding of one's identity. Therefore, from Erikson's point of view, social media can positively affect adolescents by giving them opportunities to explore who they are and connect with others who understand them.

On the other hand, Erikson's theory can also explain some negative effects. Adolescents may care strongly about the opinions of others because they are still developing their identity. Social media can increase this pressure because young people can see the number of likes, comments and followers they receive. Some young people may begin to connect these numbers with their popularity or importance. If a post receives very few likes, they may feel rejected. Young people may also change their appearance or behaviour to gain approval from others. Avci et al. (2025) reported that social comparison was associated with both identity distress and identity exploration. Therefore, social media may help adolescents explore their identities; however, too much comparison and pressure for approval may lead to anxiety, confusion and low self-esteem.

Bowlby's attachment theory can also explain the effects of social media. Bowlby (1969) believed that the relationships children develop with their main caregivers may influence their later relationships. Children who develop secure and supportive relationships with their caregivers may learn that other people can be trusted and will provide support when needed. This is known as secure attachment. In contrast, insecure attachment may cause individuals to worry more about rejection or whether other people care about them.

Attachment may influence how adolescents respond to social media. An adolescent with secure relationships may use social media to communicate with friends without worrying too much about every interaction. For example, if a friend does not respond immediately to a message, the adolescent may understand that their friend could simply be busy. In comparison, an adolescent who is worried about rejection may think that the friend is ignoring them. Features such as online status and read receipts may make this anxiety worse. The adolescent may repeatedly check their mobile phone while waiting for a response or reassurance from their friend.

Studies have found a relationship between attachment and problematic social media use. Worsley et al. (2018) reported that attachment anxiety was connected with problematic social media use. D'Arienzo et al. (2019) also found a relationship between insecure attachment and problematic social media use. This may explain why social media affects some adolescents more strongly than others. An adolescent who is already worried about rejection may become more anxious if someone does not reply to their message, does not like their post or leaves them out of an online conversation. In contrast, positive online relationships can provide adolescents with support and connections with people who understand them.

Erikson's and Bowlby's theories show that social media does not affect all adolescents in the same way. Erikson focuses on identity development, while Bowlby focuses on relationships, trust and emotional security. Both theories are relevant because adolescents use social media to present themselves to others and to find friendship and acceptance. An adolescent with supportive relationships and good self-esteem may have positive experiences on social media. In contrast, an adolescent with low self-esteem, identity difficulties or fears of rejection may be more affected by negative comments and social comparison. Therefore, parents, schools and professionals should consider what adolescents are doing on social media and how it makes them feel instead of only considering the amount of time they spend online.

In conclusion, social media can have both positive and negative effects on adolescent mental health. Studies have found links between problematic social media use and depression, anxiety, stress, poor sleep, low self-esteem, poor body image and cyberbullying. However, social media can also help adolescents communicate, find support and express themselves. Erikson's theory shows that adolescence is an important time for developing identity. Social media can support this process, but pressure to receive likes and approval can also lead to confusion and low self-esteem. Bowlby's attachment theory shows that adolescents who fear rejection may find online communication more stressful, while supportive relationships may help protect their mental health. Overall, social media is neither always good nor always bad. Its effect on adolescent mental health depends on how adolescents use social media, what they experience online and the support they have in their everyday lives.

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