

The Impact of Social Media on Juvenile Delinquency

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Abstract. This article explores the impact of social media on juvenile delinquency and countermeasures to strengthen the online protection of teenagers from multiple perspectives. Teenagers are easily influenced by their peers and online trends. On social media, unrestricted comments, the pursuit of likes and followers, and exposure to cyberbullying can lead them to imitate harmful behaviors or make poor choices, which may distort their values, also led them to commit criminal acts. This study, grounded in social learning theory, general strain theory, and the de-individuation effect, examines how adolescents are influenced to imitate hazardous challenges, manage stress through deviant behaviors, and participate in cyberbullying under diminished personal accountability. Empirical evidence, including the “coma challenge” tragedy, social media–induced violent incidents, and cases of cyberbullying, highlights the profound psychological and legal ramifications of such behaviors. To avoid these risks preventive measures can be taken at the family, school, technology platform, legal, and social levels to create a positive online environment for teenagers.

Keywords: Social Media, Impact, Juvenile Delinquency

1. Introduction

In today's society, social media influences everyone's life, like TikTok, Instagram, Discord, anonymous forums. The 54th "Statistics Report on Internet Development in China" released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) shows that the number of Internet users in China has reached nearly 1.1 billion (1,099.67 million), and 78.0% of people in China uses the internet [1]. In newly registered Internet users, 49.0% are young people aged 10-19 [1]. Globally, 95% of young people are active on social media, spending three hours in average per day [1]. These data not just demonstrate how widely internet has been used by teenagers but also show its role as a crucial method for information to spread and making social interaction [1]. Due to the lack of regulation on social media, an increasing number of minors are exposed to harmful content online. There's also some vicious incidents caused by teenagers related with social media. People refer to these behaviors as Juvenile Delinquency, which includes not only violent crimes but also activities such as online fraud, illegal transactions, and more. For example, in the year of 2021, 10-year-old girl suffocated to death when playing the "coma challenge". Her parentssued TikTok, accusing that it's the app's algorithm that recommended the video actively to their daughter, causing her death. In response to extreme cases like the "coma challenge", the Department of Justice and Federal Trade

Commission (FTC) are filing lawsuits directly linking platforms' failure to protect minors to legal liability, accusing them of violating the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA). In the meantime, the Congress is actively promoting laws such as the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA), which aims to hold platforms accountable for harmful content pushed by their algorithms [2]. Adolescents are more susceptible to the influence of social media compared to other age groups due to their search for identity, vulnerability to peer pressure, and weaker impulse control [3]. This paper argues that while social media does not inherently cause juvenile delinquency, its algorithmic amplification, the culture of validation seeking, and the anonymity it affords significantly exacerbate risk factors by facilitating cyberbullying, encouraging dangerous imitation, and normalizing deviant behaviors.

2. Theoretical framework

According to social learning theory, people learn behavior through observation, imitation and reinforcement [4]. In the "coma challenge" case, Naira may have observed the behavior of others in the challenge videos and seen that these videos received a large number of likes and attention, making her influenced by the "vicarious reinforcement," which led to a motivation to imitate. Because teenagers lack awareness and self-regulation ability, they are more likely to be attracted to these seemingly "fun" or "popular" events, which eventually lead to tragedy.

According to general stress theory, stress can lead to negative emotions, which may in turn trigger criminal behavior to cope with stress [5]. Cyberbullying is a strong negative stimulus. Social Comparison on social media and the desire for status can bring huge pressure and may prompt teenagers to commit crimes in order to gain attention or material benefits.

According to the de-individualization and network de-inhibition effects, in anonymous or group environments, individual's sense of responsibility will decrease, and they are more likely to engage in antisocial behaviors [6]. The anonymity of social media is a key factor leading to cyberbullying and the Posting of aggressive remarks, as it reduces the perceived risk of behavior.

3. Reasons

Everyone can freely make comments on social media. Despite most formal social media websites having taken supervisory measures. However, it is inevitable that some improper remark will be made. Teenagers do not yet have fully developed judgment skills, so they can easily be misled or even imitate and carry out harmful behaviors.

On social media, the number of likes and followers has become a simple quantitative indicator for measuring self-worth. However, immature teenagers are very easy to do some outrageous or even illegal and disciplinary things to attract attention for the sake of traffic.

There is a certain degree of bullying present on social media. According to the research, slightly less than half of the surveyed students (43.8%) reported that they had not experienced interpersonal attacks on social networking platforms [7]. For the remaining students, aggressive behavior on social media is a relatively common occurrence: one-fourth (24.4%) stated that they had been attacked by other users; a nearly equal proportion (26.6%) said they had witnessed attacks on others; and a relatively small number (5.2%) admitted that they had carried out attacks on other users themselves [7]. The perpetrator could carry out the same behavior because he enjoys the feeling of power by bullying others online, while the victims could also act aggressive or violent to retaliate.

4. Impacts

Social media has many aspects when impacting on teenager' crime committing. Like the spreading and mimicking of violent actions, physical and psychological harm caused by cyberbullying, the impact on values and judgment, and the reduction of legal awareness.

4.1. Imitation and dissemination of violent behavior

Teenagers' minds are not yet mature, and they are very likely to imitate violent behaviors on the Internet. In the summer of 2024, two incidents of violent attacks were committed by teenagers, influenced by social media trends, that occurred in Mount Prospect, a suburb of Illinois. Eleven teenagers aged 16 and 17 faced felony charges for their involvement in the incidents. They used dating apps to lure two adult men into assaulting and vandalizing them. Police investigations revealed that the group was influenced by a popular social media trend to commit these crimes. Teenagers are at a critical stage of developing their minds and actions, and their judgment, self-control, and moral cognition are not fully mature. At this stage, they are easier to be impacted by external influences, especially those from their peers and social media. "Challenges," "trends," and violent videos on social platforms are often packaged as "fun," "cool," and "popular," misleading teenagers into believing that these behaviors are acceptable and even worth imitating. Therefore, teenagers are very likely to imitate such bad behaviors

4.2. Physical harm and psychological distortion caused by cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is a serious problem on social media, with many people experiencing humiliating messages and false information being spread online. Although this type of bullying doesn't involve direct physical violence, it can still cause real damage, especially to teenagers. According to the reports, on August 7, 2022, McKenna Brown, an American girl, committed suicide due to cyberbullying [8]. She was tricked into sharing indecent photos online, which then went viral, leading to humiliation and bullying at school. She was also sexually assaulted. Although she worked hard to recover over the next two years, cyberbullying came back during her year three of high school, particularly rumors related with sexual assault. When McKenna saw friends on Snapchat gathering without her, she felt overwhelmed by the renewed online bullying, which brought back old bad memories. Unable to stand this, she committed suicide [8]. The harm of cyberbullying should not be ignored. Some bullies may feel powerful online, but in real life they cannot get the same feeling. This may cause them to have mental problems and start to do bad things in the real world as well. Cyberbullying can seriously affect teenagers' mental health. The damage it brings is deep and long-lasting. In fact, the harm caused by cyberbullying is not smaller than the harm from real-life bullying.

4.3. Reduce legal awareness

When teenagers go anonymous on social media, they often feel like they will not be discovered or punished, making them more likely to join in illegal actions. Some teenagers buy other people's accounts to hide their true identities and do not worry about the outcomes when they join in cyberbullying or spread false information.

5. Countermeasures

At the family and school level: Many schools lack giving students digital citizenship education, and their education stays at basic computer skills. Teenagers' lack of education about the legal and moral consequences of online behavior, could lead to a lack of understanding of the negative effects of misleading speeches online and the serious legal consequences of inciting violence, spreading hate speech, or engaging in cyberbullying. This is not just the case in schools; many parents, too, lack of understanding of the impact of social media on their children and don't pay attention to their children's behavior on social media. Parents and schools should instill positive values in children, make online legal education compulsory, teach children to identify online rumors and false news and stop them in time when discovered, instruct them to pay attention to their words and deeds on social media, and explain to them that the Internet is not a lawless place. Any act that harms others or the person being harmed will be punished by law.

At the technical level: Social Media should strength online content review and real-name registration for accounts, improve algorithms for recommending posts, Reduce teenagers' exposure to low-quality, violent or misleading information to prevent the formation of an "information cocoon. For example, artificial intelligence and big data technologies can be utilized to monitor, identify and intercept bad information, false news and harmful content. In addition, efforts should be made to promote the development of youth models on platforms to provide minors with a healthier online environment, such as time management reminders, content classification, and parent monitoring tools, thereby helping teenagers use the Internet more safely and reasonably.

At the legislative level: Improve laws and regulations on youth online protection. In light of the new situation of the rapid development of the Internet, legal provisions should be revised in a timely manner to clarify the definitions and scopes of various new types of cyber crimes, such as online fraud, privacy leakage, and cyberbullying. At the same time, the penalties for illegal acts should be increased to raise the cost of violations and form an effective deterrent.

At the social level: Encourage and support social organizations and volunteers to participate in youth online protection works. The awareness of cyber security among teenagers, parents and the public can be enhanced by organizing both online and offline promotional activities, lectures and training sessions, and their ability to identify false information, online fraud and inappropriate content can be strengthened. At the same time, enterprises and public welfare organizations should be encouraged to cooperate to develop more cybersecurity education resources and tools suitable for teenagers, such as interactive courses, public service advertisements, In addition, the media should proactively disseminate positive and healthy online culture, guide the direction of public opinion, shape a favorable social public opinion environment, and create a safe, healthy and positive online ecosystem for teenagers.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, social media is a crucial part of teenagers' lives, but it is also a double-edged sword. While it makes life easier, it also brings significant risks. The lack of strict supervision on some platforms has recommended minors harmful content, leading to the imitation of violent behavior, cyberbullying and reduced legal awareness. The coma challenge and violent attacks warn people that we need to intervene in the use of social media by minors, otherwise more similar incidents will occur in the future. Interventions can be made at the family, school, technology, legislation and social levels to reduce the impact of social media on teenager committing crime and create a safer online environment.

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