

UDC: 316.624-053.66/.81:004.738.5
DOI:10.5937/PDSC26031D

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VIOLENCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA AS A RISK FACTOR FOR DELINQUENT BEHAVIOR AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

Abstract: Digitalization has brought numerous changes in modern life, affecting all spheres of society and becoming an integral part of everyday life. In addition to its many positive impacts, the digital environment also carries the risk of various negative effects. Social media enable easier and faster communication and connection between people, but at the same time expose users to harmful and violent content, which can contribute to the adoption of undesirable patterns of behavior.

Various forms of violence are present on social media, from hate speech and threats to the videos containing violent content. Young people represent a particularly vulnerable category, given their extensive use of social media. Such content can have a significant impact on their psychological and social development, as well as their behavior in digital and real-life environments. In this sense, social media can be seen as a risk factor for delinquent behavior among young people.

The paper analyzes violence on social media as one of the criminogenic factors that may influence the development of delinquent behavior among young people, while the empirical part of the paper analyzes the results of a survey conducted among young adults aged 18 to 29, focusing on the

frequency of exposure to violence on social media and the impact of such content.

The aim of the paper is to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between social media and youth behavior and to point out the need to strengthen the prevention of delinquency in the digital environment.

Keywords: *criminogenic factors, social media, online violence, young people*

INTRODUCTION

Technological development and the emergence of the Internet have brought significant changes in people's lives. According to some data, today the planet has about 8.3 billion people, and data show that more than 6 billion people today use the Internet (or about 74% of the population) and that 60% of the world's population uses social networks (Worldometer, 2026; Kemp, 2025; Singh, 2026). In addition to numerous positive influences, social networks also contain content that can have a negative impact.

Young people spend a lot of time on social networks, which is why they represent a particularly sensitive category. Their behavior, attitudes and values are influenced by various factors, and social networks can be one of them. Exposure to harmful and violent content can affect their behavior, which increases the risk of adopting negative behavior patterns.

The aim of the paper is to analyze violence on social media as a risk factor for delinquent behavior of young people¹ and to through research examine the frequency of exposure to violent content, with the aim of better understanding the relationship between social media and young people's behavior and indicating the need to strengthen the prevention of delinquency in the digital environment.

Social media and violence on social media

Social media are web platforms that allow people to connect and communicate over the internet (Kuzmanović, 2025, p. 6). Users of these platforms can communicate in different ways - through video calls, audio or text messages, as well as by creating and sharing different content in the

¹ According to the Law on Youth, this category of residents includes persons aged 15 to 30 (Article 3).

form of text, photos, images or videos. In addition, users can leave comments or so-called likes or can react with other emoticons to other people's content, thereby expressing emotions, attitudes and opinions in the digital environment (Kuzmanović, 2025, p. 6).

Social media allow connecting people, informing, communicating and monitoring the content of a large number of users. They enable the exchange of ideas, opinions and attitudes, which is why they play an important role in modern social communication. Users use them to achieve different private and professional goals, that is, to satisfy different needs. The research concluded showed that social media has given users the ability to share content and opinions without having to depend on traditional and centralized news media with the ability to reach a large portion of the population. They state that millions, perhaps billions of posts or tweets have been used to detect activism on social networks, to help emergency services, to analyze the spread of disease, to discover the role of different users in the network and their behavior, to provide information in various fields, etc (Curiel, Cresci, Muntean & Bishop, 2020).

While it is undeniable that social media offer content that can be useful, educational, creative and entertaining, they also offer content that can be harmful. The Internet and social media offer various opportunities to create and share content, but there is the possibility of violating privacy and security and creating and sharing harmful and inappropriate content. Social media connect a large number of people from all parts of the world and enable the establishment and maintenance of communication and interaction between persons who know each other, but also with persons who are completely unknown to the users. Such a possibility can represent a certain risk, especially for younger categories of the population, who are more susceptible to various negative influences due to their age and insufficient life experience.

Violence on social media as a risk factor for delinquent behavior of young people

Delinquent behavior is the result of the interaction of various factors, which can be objective and subjective (Bošković & Marković, 2015, p. 79). Risk factors are circumstances that increase the likelihood of delinquent behavior and can be seen as a danger and potential to develop delinquent behavior, but they are not sufficient in themselves to lead to its occurrence. Whether delinquent behavior will occur depends on the existence and action

of protective factors and individual characteristics of the person (Pavićević & Stevanović, 2015).

Violence represents a significant risk factor in the development of children and young people, and its consequences can be long-term. Risk factors associated with violence can be classified into four basic groups: individual (e.g. alcohol abuse, abuse of psychoactive substances, early aggressiveness and antisocial behavior, low self-esteem), family (abuse, exposure to violence, weak family ties, poor parental supervision), factors of the neighborhood and community environment (feeling of insecurity and need for self-defense, need for membership and belonging to gangs for identity or self-protection, attitudes that promote the use of violence) and school factors (absence of prosocial peers, peer rejection, poor performance at school, weak connection with school). These factors are interconnected, which is why a multidisciplinary and systemic approach is necessary for the prevention of violence (Pavićević & Stevanović, 2015).

Various patterns of violent behavior are present on social media, such as cyber violence, threats, harassment, hate speech, humiliation and other forms of abuse. Data show that hate speech on social media is on the rise and that the digital environment enables its rapid spread, and that the consequences cross the boundaries of the online space and that they are reflected in real life (Mršević & Janković, 2022). Therefore, better control of these platforms is necessary.

Disturbing contents, including videos of various forms of violence, spread through social media, have a large number of views and reactions from users and can easily become accessible to a large number of people, including minors and young people. Such contents can have a particularly unfavorable effect on people who are more emotionally unstable, who have symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as on those who have pronounced aggressive personality traits.

The characteristics of the digital environment represent a special danger. Anonymity on the networks and the feeling of individual users that their identity can remain undiscovered and their behavior unsanctioned can encourage individuals to exhibit aggressive or violent behavior that they would probably not exhibit in direct communication in a real environment. At the same time, social networks are globally distributed and accessible to a large number of users whose harmful content can become available to users around the world in a short time. This is exactly what limits and makes it difficult to remove or limit them, which is why the consequences can be more long-lasting and intense.

In addition, the algorithms of social networks and other digital platforms often recommend similar posts to users who view and react to certain content, that is, based on previous views and user interactions, they recommend similar posts. When it comes to negative content, such a way of personalization can lead to their frequent and continuous exposure to similar posts, which increases the risk of deepening negative emotions and attitudes, normalizing violence, accepting deviant patterns of behavior and their possible reproduction in real life. Algorithms on social networks play a key role in the reproduction and spread of violence on social media, because as Stepanović (2022) states, they manage the visibility of content, form “filter bubbles” and leave them content according to their preferences, habits and desires, which increases the possibility of manipulating users and influences their behavior and opinion, which is why stricter legal regulation of digital platforms is necessary.

Minors and young people represent a particularly risky category of users of social media, bearing in mind that they are people who are still forming their personality, who have psychological and social sensitivity, and who more easily accept attitudes, lifestyles and cultural patterns than traditional ones. With this category of people, the need for socialization and communication is expressed, and social media play a significant role in their lives. They spend a lot of time using these platforms for communication, information, entertainment, education and they are an important factor in building their identity. Precisely because of this, they are largely exposed to various contents and influences, including harmful ones. Frequent exposure to violence can contribute to its normalization, and users of social media can be witnesses of violence, victims, as well as perpetrators. The patterns of violence they adopt in the family environment can be transferred to peer relationships, public space and social networks. However, violence in the digital space in certain situations can lead to violence in real life.

Exposure to violent content can negatively affect young people and lead to various psychological consequences, such as anxiety, depression, stress, reduced empathy, etc. In addition, it can also lead to disruption of social relations and acceptance of aggressive behavior patterns.

Violence on social networks is the subject of numerous studies in contemporary domestic and foreign literature. Research results indicate that greater exposure to media with antisocial and risky content significantly contributes to the occurrence of cyber violence over time (den Hamer, A, Konijn, E.A., 2015).

In Croatia was published a preview of significant research on cyber violence among children and young people, published in the period from

1990 to 2025, was published (Popović & Vejmelka, 2026). It was determined that the prevalence of victimization ranged from 7% to 55%, and the prevalence of violence from 1.9% to 30%, and that the most common forms of violence are gossip, ridicule and insults. Face-to-face violence was found to be one of the most common factors that preceded cyber-violence. Research has shown that the consequences of cyberbullying are psychological in nature, and that they negatively affect a person's self-confidence, as well as their success in school.

Research on harassment on social networks, which was conducted among high school students in Serbia (Stanković, 2019), indicates that a large number of respondents were victims of cyberbullying (51.6% of respondents), and an insignificant part committed this type of violence (20.2% of respondents). In addition, a coincidence was also noticed in the forms of violence on the Internet - insults, ridicule and spreading of rumours. It has been established that there is a connection between victimization and the perpetration of cyber violence, because perpetrators are often victims at the same time. The research shows that as many as 34% of respondents experienced a live conflict and that this conflict was preceded by violence on social networks.

Considering the foregoing, it can be concluded that cyberbullying is a risk factor for various forms of deviant behavior.

Theoretical considerations

Theories of social learning

Social learning theories is based on the assumption that delinquent behavior is, among other things, the result of the process of imitation, identification and imitation of models that are present in the social environment. According to the theory of imitation, delinquency is a form of learned behavior that develops as a result of imitating role models from an early age. Sutherland developed the theory of differential association², according to which this kind of behavior is caused by the interaction of individuals and groups that accept criminal motives, attitudes and patterns of behavior. Such behavior is adopted by learning and socializing with delinquents, whereby criminal patterns are transmitted through direct communication, especially within close social groups. He believed that it is learned through mutual communication and interaction with deviant groups,

² See more of the central theses of the theory of differential association presented by Sutherland in *Criminology* (2018) Nikolić-Ristanović, V. & Konstantinović-Vilić, S.

both through the adoption of specific forms of behavior and through the acceptance of attitudes that justify such behavior (Bošković & Marković, 2015, pp. 66-69). Deviant behavior can be adopted through interaction with other people, but it is also adopted in a situation of frequent exposure to contents that approve of criminality and portray it as an acceptable or desirable form of behavior. In this way, criminal patterns of behavior are adopted through interaction with other people, but also through books, the press, movies, and in modern times, social media. There is a higher probability of acceptance of such patterns of behavior if messages, attitudes and models that justify or encourage the violation of norms prevail in the environment of a potential delinquent (Nikolić-Ristanović & Konstantinović-Vilić, pp. 300-301).

Similarly, the theory of differential identification starts from the assumption that delinquent behavior is learned, with the emphasis that it is a consequence of the individual's identification with role models that may be real or imagined. An individual reproduces the behavior of role models, and if the role models are deviant, the probability of adopting delinquent behavior patterns is higher (Bošković & Marković, 2015, p. 69).

Proceeding from the aforementioned positions that behavior is learned, i.e. adopted by direct interaction with others, but also by observation, identification and imitation, it can be said that even deviant forms of behavior can be adopted in this way. The behavior that is reproduced is adopted in the real, but also in the digital environment. In this sense, the influences of the social environment are no longer limited to the real environment, family, friends, school, work, local environment, but also extend to the digital environment, i.e. social media, which expands the circle of influence. Social media represents an environment that is conducive to learning and adopting certain forms of behavior. It allows users to consume different content on a daily basis, including violent content. Young people spend a lot of time on social media and follow pages with different content and interact with a large number of other users. Public figures and so-called influencers attract a lot of attention from users, especially younger categories, and their peers and the content they support can also have a significant influence on the adoption of certain attitudes and patterns of behavior. Unfortunately, violent content attracts a lot of attention, has a greater number of views and reactions (comments and emoticons), and algorithms can recommend such content to a larger number of users, and can have an impact on the adoption of certain harmful behavior patterns. Violent patterns of behavior spread and reproduce easily, especially among young people who are developing their personality and forming their

identity. In this sense, social media represent a digital environment in which exposure to different content, interaction with other users and the influence of algorithms can contribute to the acceptance or rejection of certain patterns of behavior.

The theory of differential associations is based on the assumption that the adoption of deviant behavior is not conditioned solely by direct contact with delinquent persons. Exposure to messages and content that justify or positively represent criminality can play a significant role in the learning process of such behavior (Bošković & Marković, 2015). In modern society, in addition to traditional media, social networks represent an important channel through which patterns of behavior, values and attitudes are transmitted. If an individual comes into contact more often with content that supports the violation of norms than with those that condemn it, the probability of accepting deviant behavior patterns increases.

Theory of social bonds

The theory of social bonds is based on the assumption that there are four basic social bonds that improve a person's socialization and the stronger these bonds are, the less likely it is to manifest deviant behavior. Bonds are connection or loyalty; obligation or commitment; involvement and belief. The first connection refers to the connection with family and school. Loyalty to the family, more intimate and close relationships and a higher degree of identification with values within the family suppress delinquent predispositions. Commitment refers to commitment to educational content, while involvement implies engagement in conventional community activities. The fourth connection refers to the acceptance of the system of social values - laws, people and institutions (Bošković & Marković, 2015, pp. 65-66).

Bearing this in mind, it can be said that the weakening of these ties can negatively affect the behavior of potential deviant persons. Weak or bad ties increase the likelihood of criminal behavior (Ilijić, 2019, p. 72). If the ties with family and social institutions are weak, young people can build ties and seek belonging in the digital space. In the digital environment, which is characterized by anonymity, a reduced sense of responsibility and punishment and the possibility of easier violations of norms, there is a possibility of increasing the probability of accepting negative patterns of behavior that are represented on social networks, if social ties in the real environment are weakened. If this is not the case, these connections can contribute to the development of positive patterns of behavior and the adoption of attitudes that can reduce the negative impact of harmful content on social networks.

Research on violence on social media conducted among young people

Bearing in mind the complexity of the phenomenon of violence on social media and its potential influence on the behavior of young people, a study was conducted with the aim of determining the frequency of exposure to violent content on social media and examining the views of young people on the impact of such content. The subject of the research is the exposure of young people to violent content on social media and their possible influence on delinquent behavior.

The main assumption of the research is that young people are exposed to violent content on social media and that frequent exposure to violent content contributes to the normalization of violence among young people, and that there is a connection between frequent exposure to violent content and a more positive attitude towards delinquent behavior, and that it can represent a risk factor for the manifestation of delinquent behavior.

The research was conducted among students and candidates for admission to the faculty of the institution where the authors are employed. Although the sample is small, as it includes 95 young adults aged 18 to 29, the importance of this research should not be diminished. It provides relevant insight into the attitudes and experiences of young people about violence on social media, which can serve as a basis for further research, but also for the development of preventive and educational measures in the field of digital literacy and youth protection.

A survey questionnaire was used for the research, which the respondents filled out online. This fact can be the subject of criticism of this research, bearing in mind that there is a physical separation between the researcher and the respondents and that this can affect the truthfulness of the answers. However, we believe that this influence is possible to an insignificant extent. The survey questionnaire included 24 questions related to the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, habits of using social networks, content with violence on social networks, the connection between exposure to violence and attitudes about delinquent behavior.

Research results

Young people aged 18 to 29 years participated in the research. Respondents of both sexes participated, with male respondents making up 31.6% of the respondents, and female 68.4%.

Almost all respondents use social networks (95.8%). They use Instagram (82.1%), Tik Tok (50.5%) and YouTube (48.4%) most often, while Facebook, X (Twitter) and other networks are used to a much lesser extent. The largest number of respondents spend between two and four hours a day

on social networks (49.5%) or less - between one and two hours a day (22.1%), and a smaller number of users spend more than six hours a day on social networks (8.4%). This indicates that young people spend a lot of time on social networks and that they do it every day, so social networks are an important part of their everyday life.

The vast majority of respondents answered that they had seen violent content on social networks (98.9%) and calls for violence or conflict (70.5%). Part of the respondents was not sure whether they saw a call to violence or conflict (12.6%), while a small number did not see content containing violence (one respondent) or did not see a call to violence (17.9%). This indicates that violent content is present on social media followed by young people.

Young people mostly agree with the claims that there is hate speech on social networks. Most of the respondents (78.9%) agree or completely agree with this statement, while 14.7% are not sure, and the rest disagree to a greater or lesser extent with this statement. The majority of respondents agree with the statement that videos of physical conflicts are common on social networks (53.7%), as well as sharing such content on social media is common (48.4%) and that algorithms facilitate the spread and sharing of such content (67.4%).

Respondents moderately agree with the statement that violence is part of everyday content on social media, and considering that 42.1% of respondents agree or completely agree with this statement, it can be said that a significant part of the cause considers that violence is a frequent occurrence on social media. Bearing in mind that 34.7% of respondents do not agree or completely disagree with the above statement, and that 23.2% of respondents are undecided, it can be concluded that the majority of respondents recognize violence as frequent content on social media, although this perception is not unanimous.

A significant part of respondents agree or completely agree with the statement that frequent exposure to violent content leads to reduced sensitivity to violence (49.5%), while 18.9% are undecided, and 31.6% of respondents disagree with this statement. This indicates that there is a certain division of opinion when it comes to this claim, but looking at the results as a whole, it can be said that the prevailing attitude confirms the stated claim and indicates that this phenomenon is recognized as one of the possible harmful consequences of frequent exposure to violent content on social networks.

The majority of respondents agree or fully agree with the statement that social media contribute to the acceptance of violence as normal behavior

(56.9%), which indicates that the majority of respondents recognize the negative influence of social media on the normalization of violent behavior.

To the greatest extent respondents agree with the claim that posts with violent content often receive a large number of views and reactions (73.7%). Although there is a slight disagreement with the stated statement (7.4%) and that 18.9% of respondents are undecided, it can be concluded that the majority of respondents believe that this type of content achieves a high level of interaction, which is important for understanding how it spreads on social media and understanding its popularity among users.

When it comes to the impact of such content on the behavior of young people, more than half of respondents believe that young people today are less sensitive to violence than before (55.8%), which indicates that the belief about increased insensitivity is slightly prevalent, although even 20% of respondents do not agree with this statement. This indicates that there is a division among the respondents on the stated claim, but that the stated position prevails.

The majority of respondents (68.4%) think that young people sometimes imitate the violence they see on social media. A large percentage of respondents agree that exposure to violent content can increase aggressive behavior (78.9%), that violence on the Internet can turn into violence in real life (76.8%) and that social media can contribute to the development of delinquent behavior among young people (75.8%), as well as that user reactions can encourage the spread of violent content (72.6%). Although there are individual discrepancies, it can be concluded that social media have a significant influence on the behavior of young people.

Almost all respondents (89.5%) believe that it is necessary to strengthen the control of violent content on social media, and the majority also believe that education on the safe use of social media can contribute to the prevention of violence among young people (82.1%).

CONCLUSION

Violence on social media represents a significant risk factor for delinquent and aggressive behavior of young people, bearing in mind that young people use social media every day, that they are a significant part of their everyday life and that they are often exposed to violent content.

Although violent content on social media is often present, it can be concluded that young people largely are able to recognize the manifestations of hate speech, depictions of physical conflicts and the frequent sharing of such content. It is significant that they recognize the influence of algorithms and

the dynamics of social media on the greater visibility and spread of such content, and thus their availability and influence.

To a certain extent, young people are aware of the risks associated with the influence of social media and their potential contribution to the development of delinquent behavior. Frequent exposure to violent content can lead to reduced sensitivity to violence, as well as to its normalization among young people. Young people recognize the possibility that exposure to violence on the Internet can encourage aggressive behavior, imitation of violence, even the transition of violence from virtual to real life, which indicates its potential delinquent character.

In order to reduce the harmful effects of social media on young people, it is necessary to act preventively, among other things, through increased control of content and education of young people about the safe use of social media.

The digital environment, through exposure to violent contents and their wide availability, can have a negative impact on the behavior of young people and contribute to the development of various forms of deviant and delinquent behavior. Violence on social media represents a relevant and recognized risk for the emergence of delinquent behavior among young people and can influence the formation of attitudes and their behavior. Exposure to violence on social media will not necessarily lead to delinquent behavior, but in interaction with other criminogenic factors it may have such effects. That is why it is important to act preventively and reduce the negative effects that social media can have.

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