

The Effect of social media on Individuals' Perception and Criminal Behavior

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Abstract. Social media has become an essential part of human life. Despite the fact that social media brings great convenience to humans, the ubiquity of social media platforms has influenced the way people perceive crime and the levels of criminal behaviors. Among all different kinds of criminal behaviors, cyberbullying is becoming a prominent problem in the digital age. This review study conducts a comprehensive analysis of the literature that focuses on the complex relationship between social media and crime, especially cyberbullying. According to related literature, social media consumption could increase individuals' sense of fear about criminal behavior, and regions that have high levels of social media usage have spatial similarities with regions with high crime rates. Moreover, some studies discovered that the relationship between social media usage and crime rate could be very complicated. The correlation between the two factors could be positive and negative in different regions of the world. The consequences of cyberbullying are often underestimated, and the victims may suffer from mental health issues and refuse to engage in social activities. The impact of cyberbullying could be long-lasting, and interventions need to be taken in order to minimize the harm. Parents and school staff could take action to help cyberbullying victims with mental health care and reintegration. With the awareness of social media's profound influence, people would work through concerted efforts in the future in order to maximize social media's full potential while guarding people's safety.

Keywords: Social media; perception; criminal behavior; cyberbullying.

1. Introduction

As humans enter the modern digital era, social media has become an essential part of people's lives. These popular social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram, erase the boundaries among people from different regions. An uncountable number of people share their daily lives, experiences, and thoughts on social media. While social media has brought humans great convenience, they actually have the potential to subtly influence people's attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions without people noticing. The cultivation theory, proposed by Gerbner and Gross, suggested that long-time exposure to certain media messages can influence individuals' perceptions of reality and then affect their behavior and decision-making processes [1]. One of people's greatest concerns is the influence of social media on crime. Would social media help criminals just like they help normal citizens? Does social media participation increase or decrease the levels of crime? How would social media shape people's perception of crime?

The influence of social media on crime would be multifaceted and complex. Just like any other communication tool, it could be used in both positive and negative ways. Social media could bring people together to fight against crime, and police organizations could use social media to gather the information they need. On the other hand, the unregulated nature of social media provides platforms for cybercrime, such as cyberbullying and online harassment [2, 3]. Criminals could also use the help of social media to perpetrate all kinds of digital frauds. The anonymity of social media also puts a barrier for police to locate criminals on the internet. Moreover, the unbelievable speed of information spreading on social media also has great threats. The past has proven that false information and rumors spread like wildfire on social media, which may easily cause public fear and chaos.

Besides this, how would people's perception of crime be influenced by exposure to the content about crime on social media? Would people be stricter about criminals? Or would they be more likely to mimic those perpetrators? Some people suppose that exposure to news reports about crime

activities would make people have “mean world syndrome,” which makes them believe that the world is way more dangerous than it actually is. Moreover, people may tend to discriminate against the groups of people who are more likely to commit crimes, even though they are innocent.

The overall goal of this article is to explore further the multifaceted relationship between social media, individuals’ perceptions, and crime. By carefully researching existing articles, the factors that influence levels of crime will be investigated. Eventually, this article aims to offer researchers and educators a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between social media, crime, and society’s perceptions, and provide help and incentives for possible future studies in this area.

2. Method

The methodology of this review paper consists of a comprehensive search process to identify relevant studies and literature that are related to social media consumption and criminal behaviors. A systematic search of academic databases (e.g., Google Scholar and PubMed). The reason behind this is because of the databases’ vast coverage of academic articles. During the research, articles examining the portrayal of criminal behavior in popular media will be included, and all the studies were published in peer-reviewed journals or websites that focus on social media’s influence on the perception of crime and criminal behavior. The main emphasis would be articles written in English and conducted on human subjects. Besides this, the filter was set to include studies published between 2000 and 2023 to ensure the incorporation of contemporary research.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Influence of Social Media on Individuals’ Perception

Besides cyberbullying, how would social media influence people? In the book *Social Media and Crime Perception*, Feliciano focused on the relationship between social media usage and fear of crime [4, 5]. The author hypothesized that social media consumption is positively related to the fear of crime. The study found that the influence of social media is greater on people who do not have direct experience of crime, which indicates that people who feel safe are more susceptible to becoming afraid of crime by using social media. Furthermore, it is found that some spatial similarities between crime incidents and tweets show fear. In the study, the hotspots of crime incidents in San Francisco concentrated in the northeastern areas, which overlapped with hotspots of tweets showing fear even with some discrepancies. This somehow supports the argument that areas that are prevalent in tweets showing fear have spatial similarities with areas with high crime rates. However, it is noteworthy that the study has limitations in data sources and methods, and further studies would be needed in order to explore the details of these spatial similarities.

Individuals consume all different types of information on social media, and studies conducted by Intravia suggested that consuming specific content on social media related to the punishment of criminals would lead to more punitive attitudes of people toward criminals [6]. This suggests that people who read or post content about criminal behaviors or the sentencing of criminals tend to have harsher attitudes toward punishment. The study also showed that overall consumption and general news consumption on social media also have a positive relationship with the punitive attitudes of individuals. Future research could be conducted for generalizability as the studies were only limited to students and the young population.

3.2. Influence of Social Media on Criminal Behaviors

What would be the relationship between the social media usage and crime rates? The relationship may be very complicated. Taking Facebook as an example, Asongu and his colleagues conducted research focusing on the correlation between Facebook penetration and crime rate [7]. It was found that the two factors are actually negatively correlated, which means a higher level of Facebook penetration is correlated with a lower level of violent crime. The negative relationship is the most

significant at the highest quintile of the crime distribution. This means that the impact of Facebook penetration on reducing crime is most significant in regions or countries where crime rates are already high, and the effectiveness of Facebook reducing crime rate depends on the initial crime rate of the region. Even though the relationship is negative in the Middle East and North Africa, it turns out to be positive in Sub-Saharan Africa. This supports the statement that the correlation is complicated. Asongu and his colleagues suggest that the complicated relationship could be explained by the exchanged information that increases contention or hatred among social media users. Moreover, social media also provides users with avenues and solutions for societal concerns, which reduce the risk of violence or crime. Users have access to different methods of conflict resolution and crime prevention, which could eventually reduce the level of crimes. In this case, the intervention and policies focusing on social media and crime should depend on the region.

Since social media could both have positive and negative influences on society, it could be considered a double-edged sword. Based on the research on Zimbabwe conducted by Ishmael Mugari and his colleagues, social media spread fake news, which led to panic among citizens in the country [8]. Besides this, the greatest threat of social media in Zimbabwe is that it facilitates violent protests. Social media is used to plan and disseminate information about the protest. However, social media also plays an important role in preventing criminal activities. The local police use social media to teach citizens strategies to prevent crime and receive crime reports. Social media is also an important platform to gather information about crime and engage with the citizens. According to Mugari, even though social media provides convenience for criminals, it has great potential to be used in law enforcement.

3.3. Cyberbullying: Consequences and Interventions

Cyberbullying may be the most related to social media. Many people think that cyberbullying is not a crime. However, cyberbullying consists of the unauthorized sharing of victim's personal information, harassment, and many other illegal and unethical behaviors. In this case, what would be the relationship between the usage of social media and cyberbullying? In the article written by Barlett and other researchers, they conducted a three-wave longitudinal study on 3,000 youths in Singapore [9]. The data collected from the three waves are social media participation, positive attitudes, cyberbullying attitudes, and cyberbullying perpetrators. It was found that participation in certain social media platforms is related to the development of positive cyberbullying attitudes, which increases the possibility of cyberbullying perpetration. The result supports that increased participation in social media may be responsible for the development of positive cyberbullying attitudes and possible future cyberbullying perpetrators. Moreover, it was found that intervention targeting the use of social media could actually reduce cyberbullying behaviors. Besides this, promoting users' sense of empathy is also an effective method. Bartlett believes that the use of social media could not be the only cause of increased levels of cyberbullying. There must be other factors that need to be researched and analyzed in future studies.

Even though the relationship between social media and cyberbullying exists, many people still do not take cyberbullying seriously. It is true that many countries and regions do not have cyberbullying-related laws, but the consequences of cyberbullying are very serious. According to Giumetti and his colleagues' study, victimization from online cyberbullying is associated with increased distress, reduced life satisfaction, suicidal ideas, and other negative well-being outcomes [3]. People who experienced cyberbullying would have altered perceptions of social relationships. In this case, how can we minimize the harm caused by cyberbullying? The paper suggests that parents' active involvement and monitoring of social media use could be considered effective interventions. The cross-cultural variation of cyberbullying was also observed. Thus, intervention should be carefully examined based on countries or regions. Besides this, clarifying the social media usage norms and teaching safe usage would also be beneficial. Moreover, carefully choosing what to update and avoiding risky posting or self-disclosure could decrease the possibility of cyberbullying.

Furthermore, what are the specific consequences of cyberbullying? Lee and his colleagues conducted a study that determined the addiction to social media, the prevalence of cyberbullying, and possible factors related to the perpetration or victimization of cyberbullying [10]. All the 270 participants from the study are medical students with heterogeneous demographic characteristics that include gender, age, ethnicity, and religion. Participants were asked to assess their own experience with social media usage and cyberbullying and complete related surveys. The consequences of cyberbullying not only include psychological distress but also consist of severe symptoms such as social isolation. Cyberbullying victims have a great possibility to withdraw from their social relationships and activities. They may also face difficulties trying to build relationships with new people [11, 12]. Headaches, stomachaches, and other physical issues could also be the result of cyberbullying. Many impacts from cyberbullying could be long-lasting and persist into adulthood [13]. Some other major findings of the research suggest that the prevalence of victimization in the past six months is 24.4%, while the perpetration is 13.0%. Besides this, males are more likely to become victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying compared with females. The results also suggest that a higher level of social media addiction is associated with higher possibility of becoming a cyberbullying victim.

As the consequences of cyberbullying are so significant, what would be some interventions that people could use? The literature review written by Byrne examined school nurses' knowledge about related issues [14, 15]. As social media becomes more and more prominent in teenagers' lives, it also becomes the major platform for cyberbullying. In this case, school nurses should be aware of social media and the warning signs of cyberbullying in order to address the problem effectively. Since adults such as school nurses grow up without social media, they may lack the knowledge of it and be less motivated to explore it. Therefore, it would be essential to perceive social media through the lens of students and be familiar with current trending social media sites among teenagers. The nurses also need to work with other school staff to create a safe environment. Setting a peer-monitoring program and regularly holding seminars for parents and students would also be very helpful. Other options include enforcing anti-bullying policies, training school personnel, and increasing students' awareness of reporting bullying events [16]. Parents could also take part in interventions and assist students with mental health care and reintegration in the long term if necessary.

4. Implication and Future Studies

The findings from the articles had significant implications both in academic research and societal fields. As social media consumption is positively related to individuals' fear of crime, it is important to conduct further research to analyze how digital platforms such as social media could shape individuals' perceptions. Besides this, the comprehensive analysis of cyberbullying underscores the significance of resolving the problem. As methods of cyberbullying will keep evolving with social media platforms in the future, it is important to be aware of the severe consequences and possible interventions. In this case, the implications of the studies are far-reaching. Educators and policy-makers could work for further studies about the interventions and implicate them in the future. Besides this, researchers and related personnel could take advantage of the knowledge in order to build more developed social media regulations in order to use the two-edged sword more appropriately.

5. Conclusion

In recent decades, the digital revolution has shaped individuals' lives. People from the past could not imagine how much society has changed. The virtual world intervenes with the physical world, and social media platforms appear to be an influential mediator between the two worlds. This review undergoes a systematic exploration of related literature and reveals the multifaceted relationships between social media, individuals' perceptions, and criminal behaviors.

The analysis first highlights the positive relationship between social media consumption and individuals' fear of crime, indicating the significant role social media has in shaping people's perception of safety. Second, studies proved that social media platforms actually have very complicated relationships with crime rates. The correlation between the two factors varies in different regions. Furthermore, other literature proved the powerfulness of social media in both creating chaos and preventing or resolving criminal behaviors.

Among different kinds of criminal behaviors, cyberbullying would be the most relevant to social media. Multiple studies were conducted to illustrate the serious impact of cyberbullying on people such as teenagers. As the harm could be long-lasting, it is necessary to take intervention to help those victims. Excessive usage of social media can cause stress and lead to potential exposure to criminal behaviors. In order to release all the potential of social media while safeguarding individuals' well-being and safety in the digital world, people need to make all their efforts and work together in the future.

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