

Digital Footprint of Crime: Exploring The Relationship between Social Media and Criminal Behaviour

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Abstract

Social media has laid a strong foundation in everyone's daily life. It not only reshaped our communication style but also our thoughts and routine activities. This research paper explores the relationship between social media and criminal behaviour. The digital footprints can include messages, shared media, location check-ins and interactions that can be traced and analysed for behavioural pattern. These digital traces have emerged as crucial tools in both committing and solving crimes. Digital platforms provided new pathway to engage in criminal activities. The accessibility and reach of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat allow criminals to operate anonymously, target victims globally, and coordinate illegal activities discreetly. Social media can also play a role in the radicalization process, where individuals are exposed to extremist content, misinformation, or ideological grooming within online communities. By the results obtained through survey and research articles we found that social media represents a powerful double-edged sword (around 83%), it plays a major role in both construction and destruction of criminal behaviours. The digital footprint behaviour is the vital resource for crime detection and prevention. By knowing this relationship it will be an effective tool for developing criminal justice responses, digital literacy education, and ethical guidelines in the digital era. As technology continues to evolve, so too must our approaches to managing its impact on criminal behaviour and law enforcement practices.

Keywords: Footprint, crime, criminal, social, media, Forensic, Science.

Introduction

It is a digital era, social media is a platform to communicate, share information and express views of the people. This has both positive and negative impact on the environment. This platform is used to disseminate important information and facilitates global communication. The news shared in social media is not restricted for people of certain age groups, most of the platforms are open for all. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter,

and TikTok have not only reshaped social dynamics but also influenced patterns of criminal behaviour. It created opportunities for criminal activity and antisocial conduct. Social media platforms, designed to facilitate social interaction and community building, have become breeding grounds for illicit behaviour, including cyberbullying, harassment and exploitation. Social media allows to documenting and broadcasting criminal activities, either to assert dominance or gain social validation. As social media continues to permeate every aspect of our lives, it

is essential to understand its impact on criminal behaviour and implications for law enforcement, policymakers and individuals. The link between social media and criminal activity is both complex and layered. On one hand, social media can be a valuable tool for law enforcement agencies, enabling them to gather intelligence, track suspects, and disseminate information to the public. On the other hand, social media can also facilitate criminal activity, providing a platform for offenders to connect with potential victims, share illicit content, and coordinate illegal activities¹.

Theories Relating Media and Criminology

There are several theories and perspectives that connect media and criminology, analyzing how crime is portrayed, perceived and influenced through media channels. Moral panic theory is a sociological concept that explains how public's fear and anxiety can be disproportionately aroused over an issue perceived to threaten the social order. The term was popularized by Stanley Cohen. The core idea of this theory that relates media and crime is that media exaggerates and sensationalizes events and creates public fear or anxiety about certain groups or behaviour. The late 1960s saw the emergence of cultivation theory, formulated by George Gerbner, shaping the way mass communication is studied. The core idea of this theory is Heavy exposure to television especially crime dramas or news cultivates a distorted view of reality, making viewers believe the world is more dangerous than it actually is. It is related to criminology as it influences the public support for harsh criminal justice policies due to fear of crime. Social Learning Theory was developed by Albert Bandura (1977) it argues that people learn behaviors—including criminal ones—through interaction, observation, and imitation of others, especially when those behaviors appear to be rewarded or go unpunished. When relating this theory to media and crime, users may mimic the criminal behaviour seen in viral content or from the influencers. Normalization of Deviant behaviour via memes, videos, or group chats can encourage participation in criminal acts. Self-Control Theory also known as General Theory of Crime

was developed by Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi (1990). The theory proposes that people who lack self-control have a higher tendency to participate in impulsive and potentially criminal activities. The instant gratification and impulsive nature of social media can trigger criminal behaviours like extortion, cyberbullying, or online fraud. Platforms reward risky behavior with attention especially among youth².

Media Facilitating Criminal Activity

Cybercrime

The crime done using computer system or digital devices is referred as cybercrime. It encompasses a broad range of offenses that target individuals, organisations, and government, often resulting in financial loss or damage of reputation of an individual or organization. As people run towards technology there is emerging threat about cybercrime. Illicit activities in cyberspace often include breaching computer systems, engaging in cyberbullying, committing identity-related offenses, and conducting fraudulent schemes online. Cybercriminals may act as an individual or a group of people work together. They sometimes span across international borders which makes tracking and prosecuting them more difficult. The influence of cybercrime extends across multiple levels, causing substantial harm. Even governments may face threats to national security and individual can experience emotional distress and privacy violations. The rise of the dark web has further fuelled cybercrime by offering a hidden marketplace for illegal activities. Drugs, weapons, fake documents, and stolen data are bought and sold anonymously through encrypted networks. Cryptocurrency is often used in these transactions, further complicating traceability and enforcement³.

Gang Activities

Social media is used by gangs to gather members, plan activities and promote their criminal ventures even without having any direct link between them. It has paved different ways for the criminals to communicate. Social media allows gangs to construct and promote their image by showcasing symbols of

power-such as weapons, drugs, money, and luxury goods-in ways that can attract young, impressionable users seeking identity, respect, or protection. These online conflicts then merge into real world and cause severe damage to both the parties. In sum, social media has become an integral extension of gang life, influencing how gangs recruit, communicate, and commit crimes. Its role in shaping contemporary gang culture underscores the urgent need for innovative, tech-informed strategies in both prevention and policing⁴.

Objective

- To examine how social media contributes to the criminal behavior.
- To create awareness among individual about the risk factors of social media.
- To understand how social media can be used to spread extremist ideologies and develop strategies to counter this.
- To examine the relationship between social media and specific types of crime.
- To inform prevention strategies and interventions to mitigate negative impacts.

Methodology

Methodology refers to the systematic plan, process, or approach used to carry out research. It explains how the research was conducted, including the tools, techniques, procedures, and methods used to collect, analyze, and interpret data.

Aim: To study the relationship between social media usage and criminal behaviour by analysing public perceptions, experiences, and opinions across different age groups, and to assess how social media influences crime rates and criminal activities.

Procedure

1. Research Design

The research was conducted using a survey-based approach combined with a literature review to analyze the relationship between social media usage and criminal behaviour.

2. Primary Data Collection

- A structured questionnaire was designed using **Google Forms** to collect data efficiently and securely from participants across different age groups.
- The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions aimed at understanding individuals' social media usage patterns, exposure to crime-related content, and their perceptions regarding the influence of social media on criminal behaviour.

3. Survey Process

- The Google Form link was circulated via social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Email to reach a diverse audience.
- The participants were selected randomly and included individuals from various age groups and backgrounds to ensure a broad perspective.
- Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary, and anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study.
- Respondents were informed about the purpose of the research, and consent was implied upon submission of the form.

4. Survey Questions Included

- Age
- Frequency of social media usage
- Mental health impact of not using social media for a day
- Preferred social media platforms
- Experience of witnessing crimes shared on social media
- Types of crimes influenced by social media
- Opinion on social media companies' role in preventing crime
- Perception of media influence on crime rates
- Willingness to report criminal activity seen on social media

- Personal influence by criminal activities viewed on social media
- Suggested measures to reduce social media-related crimes

Data Analysis

From the survey conducted through google forms, 187 people responded to it, the bar graph and pie chart results of 1-10 questions are as follows:

1. Age

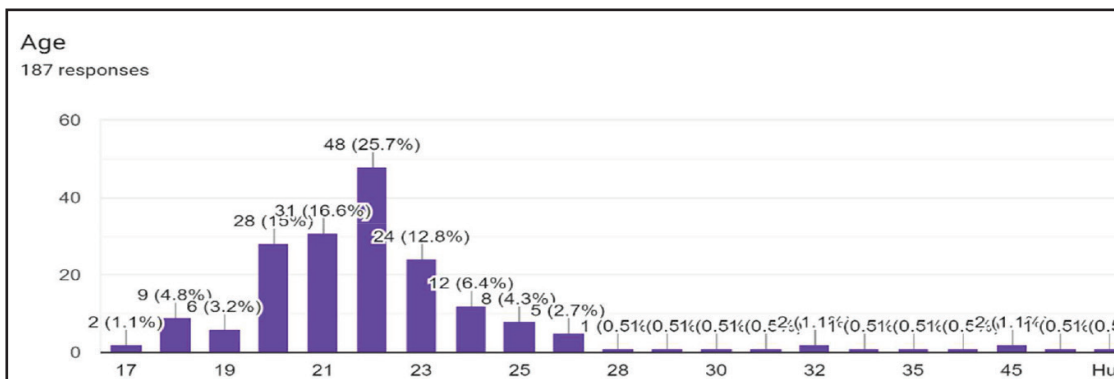


Figure 1: Age of the respondents

The people who attended the survey are under the age group of 17-45.

2. How often do you use social media?

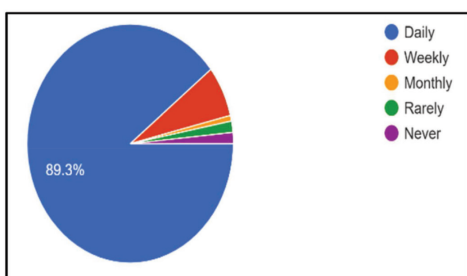


Figure 2: Usage of social media by the respondents

According to study, 89.3% people use social media daily.

3. Does a day without social media affect your mental health?

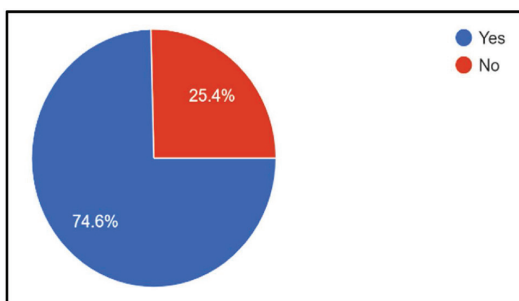


Figure 3: Effects of social media on mental health of the respondents

According to study, 74.6% people's mental health get affected without social media, while 25.4% reported that their mental health remains unaffected.

4. Which social media platform you use?

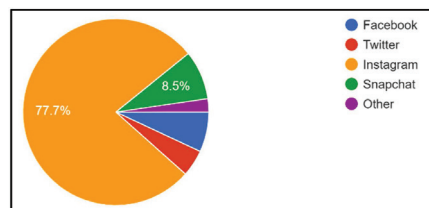


Figure 4: Frequently used social media platform by respondents

According to study, 77.7% of people use Instagram, followed by 8.5% who use Snapchat, and a small percentage use Facebook, twitter, and other platforms.

5. Have you ever witnessed crime being shared on social media?

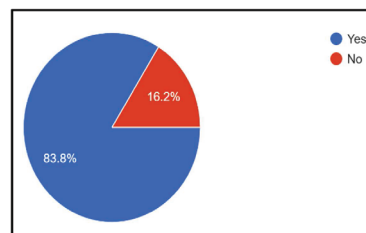


Figure 5: Crimes witnessed on social media by the respondents

According to study, 83.8% of people have witnessed crime related content being shared on social media, while 16.2% have not.

6. What types of crime do you think are most influence by social media?

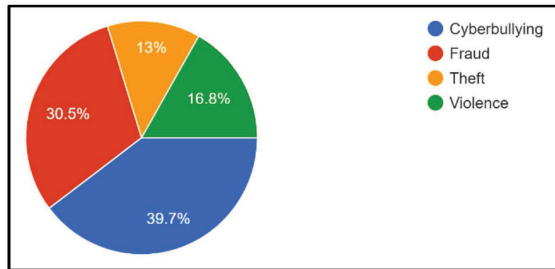


Figure 6: Types of crimes witnessed on social media by the respondents

According to the study, 39.7% of participants believe cyberbullying is the most influenced crime type by social media, followed by fraud (30.5%), violence (16.8%), and theft (13%).

7. Do you think social media companies should do more to prevent crime?

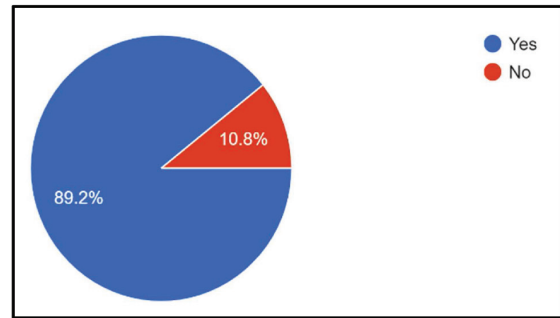


Figure 7: Prevention of crime on social media by the respondents

According to study, 89.2% of participants believe that social media companies should take more responsibility to prevent crime on their platforms and 10.8% of participants do not think social media companies need to do more.

8. In your opinion how does media influence crime rates?

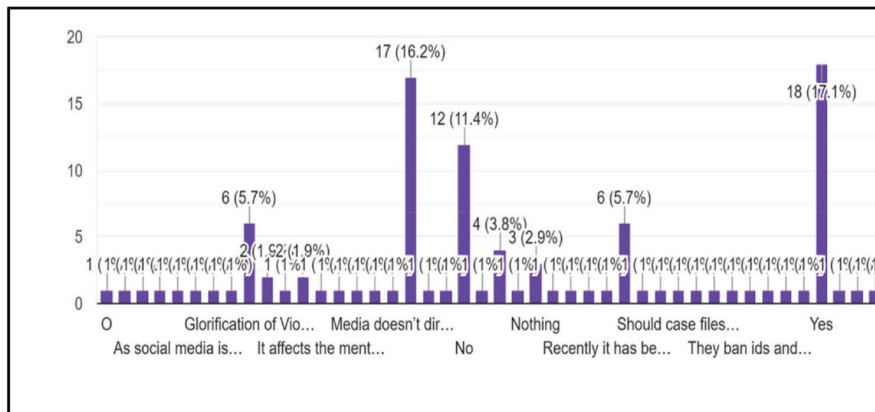


Figure 8: Social media influence on crime rates by the respondents

According to study, people response to how media influences crime rates, 5.7% said media glorifies violence, 16.2% felt media's influence has increased recently, 3.8% said media normalizes crime or spreads disturbing content, 74.3% gave unique individual opinions on media's role in crime.

9. Would you report criminal activity or suspicious behaviour in social media?

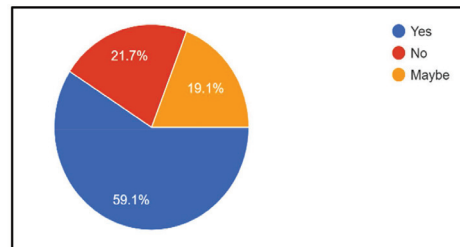


Figure 9: Reporting of criminal activities on social media by the respondents

According to study, out of 115 respondents, 59.1% said they would report criminal activity or suspicious behaviour on social media. Meanwhile, 21.7% said they would not report it, and 19.1% were unsure.

10. Have you ever felt influenced by the criminal activity you saw on social media?

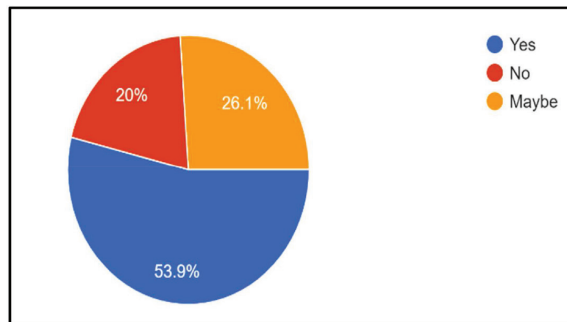


Figure 10: Influence of criminal activities on social media

From the survey it is found that among the 115 responses, 53.9% are influenced, 26.1% are unsure about it and 20% of respondents are not influenced by the criminal activity they saw on social media.

Results and Discussion

The survey was done on total of 187 individuals. From the responses obtained among 100% of people 89.3% people use socialmedia onthe daily basis. Around 74.6% people are almost addicted to it, without social media there mental health gets affected and there is a major chance of getting influenced by the activities they see in social media. And the criminal activity faced by people via social media is fraud, theft, cyberbullying and the violent contents shared throughthis platform influences the minds of people who view it this can be explained by Social learning theory. Thereare emerging trendsand challenges suchas Anonymity, cyberbullying, cybersecurity risks, jurisdictional issues, digital literacy, policy gaps, etc. These can be overcome by creating awareness among people regarding the crime happening via social media. Social media can be used by law enforcement to investigate crimes,gather evidence and even identify suspects.The positive side of social media has to

be focused. The activities in social media has to be monitored closelyto avoid the crimes.

Our results reflect broader research in the field. For instance, global prevalence of cyberbullying victimization among adolescents generally ranges between 14% and 57%, with perpetration rates from 6% to 46%¹¹. In India, one community-based study in the Gurugram district found that 1 in 4 adolescents experienced cyberbullying, particularly via WhatsApp, Instagram, and Snapchat. Additionally, a scoping review of social media studies reported a median cyberbullying prevalence of 23%, and confirmed consistent associations with depression— even though links with anxiety and self-harm were mixed¹². Compared to these figures, our findings of high exposure to crime-related content and elevated perceptions of influence and willingness to report align well with established prevalence data, offering a current, perception-based backdrop to prior empirical and review literature¹³.

Conclusion

The intersection of social media and criminal behaviour also raises important ethical and legal concerns. Issues related to privacy, surveillance, and the rights of individuals must be carefully balanced with the need for public safety and effective crime prevention. Law enforcement must navigate the delicate line between lawful investigation and infringement on personal freedoms, often in a legal and scape that is struggling to keep pace with technological change. The interaction between crime and social media presents several challenging dimensions. Social media can both facilitate crime and aid in its detection, making it a critical area of study in contemporary criminology and digital forensics. The ongoing growth of technology will influence how crimes are committed and how they are addressed by law enforcement. It is imperative for society, policymaker, and law enforcement to understand this dynamic and to develop adaptive strategies that address the challenge of the digital age while protecting civil liberties. The digital foot print of crime, once considered peripheral, is now central to the understanding and combating of modern criminal behaviour.

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