

The Impact of the Internet on the Development of Criminal Psychology among Adolescents and Preventive Measures

Weixu Wang

*University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, MN 55455, United States
wang9218@umn.edu*

Keywords: Internet; Juvenile Delinquency Psychology; Mechanisms of Influence; Preventive Measures

Abstract: The rapid expansion of the Internet has profoundly transformed the social environment in which adolescents grow and interact. While digital technology provides unprecedented opportunities for information access, communication, and learning, it also introduces new psychological and behavioral risks for young users. Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to harmful online influences due to their developmental characteristics, including identity exploration, emotional instability, and limited self-regulation. This paper examines the impact of the Internet on the formation of criminal psychology among adolescents and explores preventive strategies from multiple levels. Drawing on developmental psychology and criminology research, the paper analyzes how harmful online content, virtual social interaction, gaming addiction, and anonymity contribute to the development of delinquent attitudes and behaviors. Furthermore, it proposes comprehensive preventive measures involving social regulation, school education, family guidance, legal protection, and technological governance. By integrating psychological theory and practical prevention strategies, this study aims to provide a systematic framework for reducing online-related risks and promoting healthy adolescent development.

1. Introduction

The development of the Internet has significantly reshaped modern society, influencing communication patterns, learning environments, and social relationships. Adolescents, as one of the most active groups of Internet users, are deeply embedded in the digital environment. The Internet provides young people with access to vast amounts of information, social interaction, and entertainment. However, alongside these benefits, it also introduces potential risks that may influence adolescents' psychological development and behavioral patterns.^[1]

During adolescence, individuals experience critical stages of cognitive, emotional, and moral development. Their values, self-identity, and social norms are still forming, making them more susceptible to external influences. Exposure to harmful online content, cyberbullying, deviant communities, and violent media may affect adolescents' perception of social norms and potentially

foster criminal tendencies. Research in developmental psychology highlights that the digital environment can shape attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors in powerful ways, especially when supervision and guidance are insufficient^[5].

In recent years, scholars from criminology and psychology have increasingly focused on the relationship between Internet usage and juvenile delinquency. Studies suggest that certain online environments can normalize deviant behavior, facilitate illegal activities, and reduce psychological barriers to misconduct. Additionally, online anonymity and group interactions may intensify risky or antisocial behavior among adolescents.

Therefore, understanding how the Internet influences the formation of adolescent criminal psychology is essential for developing effective prevention strategies.^[2] This paper first examines the theoretical foundations of Internet influence on adolescent psychology, then analyzes the mechanisms through which online environments may contribute to delinquent tendencies. Finally, it proposes preventive measures at the social, educational, familial, legal, and technological levels to reduce risks and promote healthy digital development among adolescents.^[3]

2. Theoretical Foundations of the Internet and Adolescent Criminal Psychology

2.1 Characteristics of the Internet Environment and Features of Adolescent Psychological Development

The Internet environment possesses several characteristics that distinguish it from traditional social environments. These include anonymity, rapid information dissemination, accessibility, and interactive communication. Such features allow individuals to express opinions freely, interact with strangers, and access diverse content with minimal restrictions. While these characteristics enhance freedom and creativity, they may also facilitate exposure to harmful or illegal content.^[4]

Adolescents are particularly sensitive to these influences because they are undergoing significant psychological and social changes. During this developmental period, individuals often seek independence, peer approval, and identity formation. Their cognitive abilities are developing but are not yet fully mature, particularly in areas related to impulse control and long-term decision-making.

Furthermore, adolescents tend to be more curious and willing to experiment with new experiences. This tendency can lead them to explore risky online environments, including violent media, deviant communities, or illegal activities. Without adequate supervision or guidance, such experiences may influence their attitudes toward social norms and acceptable behavior.

Another important feature of adolescent psychology is the strong influence of peer groups. Online communities and social networks can serve as powerful socializing agents, shaping adolescents' beliefs and behaviors. When these digital communities promote harmful or antisocial values, adolescents may adopt similar attitudes in order to gain acceptance and belonging.

2.2 Theoretical Basis for the Internet's Influence on Adolescent Criminal Psychology

Several psychological and criminological theories help explain how the Internet may influence the development of criminal psychology among adolescents. Social learning theory suggests that individuals learn behaviors by observing others and imitating actions that appear rewarding or socially accepted. Online platforms provide numerous opportunities for adolescents to observe deviant behaviors, including cyberbullying, fraud, and digital piracy. Repeated exposure to such behaviors may normalize them and reduce moral resistance.^[6]

Another relevant perspective is the theory of differential association, which proposes that criminal behavior is learned through interactions with others who support deviant norms. Online communities can create virtual environments where individuals who share deviant interests communicate and

reinforce each other's attitudes. This dynamic can gradually shape adolescents' perceptions of legality and morality.

The concept of moral disengagement also plays a role in online environments. When individuals feel anonymous or detached from real-world consequences, they may justify harmful actions more easily. The absence of face-to-face interaction reduces empathy and accountability, making it easier for adolescents to engage in aggressive or illegal behaviors.^[7]

In addition, developmental psychology emphasizes that adolescents are still developing moral reasoning and self-control. Exposure to risky online environments during this formative period may increase the likelihood of impulsive or delinquent behaviors. As a result, understanding these theoretical frameworks is essential for analyzing the mechanisms through which the Internet influences adolescent criminal psychology.

3. Analysis of the Internet's Impact on the Formation of Adolescent Criminal Psychology

3.1 The Erosion of Values by Harmful Content

One of the most significant risks associated with the Internet is the widespread availability of harmful or inappropriate content. Violent videos, extremist propaganda, illegal activities, and explicit material can easily be accessed by adolescents. Continuous exposure to such content may gradually erode young people's moral values and distort their understanding of acceptable behavior.

When adolescents frequently encounter online content that glorifies violence, fraud, or other illegal activities, they may begin to perceive such behaviors as normal or socially acceptable. This normalization process can weaken their moral judgment and reduce psychological barriers to delinquent behavior.

Furthermore, online media often portrays risky behaviors without highlighting their real-world consequences. Adolescents who lack critical thinking skills may interpret such representations as harmless or exciting, which can increase the likelihood of imitation. Studies on Internet safety emphasize that exposure to harmful online content is associated with higher risks of aggressive and deviant behavior among young users^[8].

3.2 The Distortion of Interpersonal Perception by Virtual Social Interaction

Online communication has significantly transformed the way adolescents interact with others. Social media platforms, chat rooms, and online communities allow individuals to communicate instantly across geographical boundaries. However, virtual interaction may also distort adolescents' perception of interpersonal relationships.

Unlike face-to-face communication, online interaction often lacks nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and tone of voice. This limitation can reduce empathy and increase misunderstandings. As a result, adolescents may become more likely to engage in hostile or aggressive communication, including cyberbullying.

Moreover, online environments can create echo chambers in which individuals primarily interact with others who share similar beliefs. When adolescents participate in online communities that promote deviant or antisocial values, these attitudes may be reinforced through repeated interaction. Over time, such social dynamics may contribute to the development of criminal or antisocial tendencies.

3.3 The Weakening of Behavioral Control Due to Online Gaming Addiction

Online gaming has become one of the most popular forms of entertainment among adolescents.

While moderate gaming can provide relaxation and social interaction, excessive gaming may lead to addiction and behavioral problems. Gaming addiction can weaken adolescents' self-control and increase impulsive behavior.

Many online games are designed to provide continuous rewards and stimulation, encouraging prolonged engagement. Adolescents who spend excessive amounts of time gaming may neglect academic responsibilities, social relationships, and physical health. Over time, this imbalance can contribute to emotional instability and reduced behavioral regulation.

In some cases, violent games may also influence aggressive attitudes and desensitize players to violence. Although the relationship between violent games and real-world aggression remains debated, excessive exposure to violent gaming environments may contribute to aggressive tendencies in vulnerable individuals.

3.4 The Catalysis of Criminal Intentions by Anonymity and Group Polarization

Anonymity is a defining characteristic of many online environments. Users can interact without revealing their real identities, which reduces accountability and social pressure. For adolescents, this anonymity may create a sense of freedom that encourages risky or deviant behavior.

When individuals believe that their actions cannot be traced back to them, they may feel less constrained by social norms or legal consequences. This phenomenon can facilitate behaviors such as cyberbullying, online harassment, hacking, or digital fraud.

Additionally, group polarization in online communities can intensify extreme attitudes. When individuals interact primarily with others who share similar views, their opinions may become more radical over time. In certain cases, adolescents may be drawn into online groups that encourage illegal or antisocial activities. Such group dynamics can significantly accelerate the development of criminal intentions.

4. Internet Governance and Preventive Measures Based on Criminal Psychology Prevention

4.1 Social Level: Strengthening Online Content Regulation and Public Opinion Guidance

At the societal level, the key to governance lies in providing teenagers with a clear-cut and well-defined online space. The internet enables rapid and extensive dissemination of information. Once violent, fraudulent, vulgar, and sensational content continuously enters the vision of teenagers, it can easily undermine their ability to make judgments about right and wrong and consequences. Regulatory authorities should include platforms that minors frequently access in the scope of key governance. They should establish regular inspections and graded handling mechanisms for short videos, live streaming, social communities, and game platforms to increase the detection rate and clearance efficiency of illegal and irregular content.

Platform enterprises cannot merely engage in superficial review; instead, they should assume a more direct responsibility for content screening. Recommendation algorithms, trending list mechanisms, and topic push mechanisms all affect the distribution of teenagers' attention and also amplify the dissemination effects of certain extreme and stimulating content. For content involving violent imitation, illegal display, online bullying, and extreme remarks, platforms should shorten the dissemination chain, improve keyword recognition, conduct manual review, implement account classification management and a child protection mode, and reduce the continuous stimulation of negative public opinions on the psychology of teenagers.

The role of public opinion guidance is also very important. Simply relying on deletion and blocking is not enough to achieve the restoration of values. Social media, school external publicity platforms, and community organizations can carry out continuous dissemination around themes such

as online law and order, media identification, peer interaction, and emotion management. They should clearly explain real cases, consequences of actions, and public rules, so that teenagers can understand that online behavior is not disconnected from reality. Once a healthy, rational, and restrained public expression environment is formed, the possibility of teenagers being influenced by incorrect ideas will significantly decrease.

4.2 School Level: Implementing Digital Literacy and Mental Health Education

School-level intervention should not merely consist of "reminding students to limit their internet usage". What is more important is to incorporate digital literacy education into the curriculum as a regular course, teaching students to identify risks, judge information, and express themselves properly. Class meetings, information technology classes, and psychology classes can all undertake this task. At least one teaching session on cybersecurity should be arranged every month, with the content focusing on common issues such as rumor recognition, online violence, privacy protection, account fraud, and game addiction. When preparing lessons, teachers should replace abstract concepts with specific scenarios, so that students can understand which behaviors pose risks and how to handle problems.

For instance, a teacher can design a 40-minute case study lesson: The first 10 minutes will present three common types of online information - one is genuine news, one is an exaggerated headline, and one is a sensational rumor. Students will be divided into groups to judge based on these. The next 15 minutes will be spent discussing "What to do if you are pulled into a bullying group" and "What to do if a stranger asks for your photo". The last 15 minutes will be used by the teacher to summarize the handling steps and clearly inform the students that when encountering problems, they should take screenshots as evidence, exit the group chat, avoid confrontation alone, and immediately report to the homeroom teacher or the psychological teacher. This kind of teaching is not about explaining principles, but rather training students' ability to make judgments and respond.

Mental health education should also be integrated with online usage scenarios. It cannot merely focus on general emotion management. Schools can establish a "screening - conversation - referral" mechanism. Every semester, they can use short questionnaires to understand if students have problems such as excessive gaming, disrupted sleep patterns, being a victim of online bullying, or emotional outbursts. For high-risk students, they should arrange one-on-one conversations with a psychological teacher. If necessary, they should contact parents for joint intervention. The head teacher should also record changes in students' attention in class, homework procrastination, social withdrawal, etc., and identify and address online behavior issues as early as possible.

4.3 Family Level: Enhancing Parental Supervision and Improving Parent-Child Communication

The family is the first line of defense for teenagers when they start using the internet. Parents should not just follow up and impose restrictions when their children have problems. Instead, they should incorporate supervision into daily life. The family can set fixed internet usage times, clearly define the usage scope of mobile phones, tablets, and computers, and charge them uniformly in the common area at night to reduce the occurrence of late-night internet use alone. Regarding commonly used software, games, and social platforms, parents should know what their children are using, rather than completely ignoring it.

Parent-child communication is more important than mere restrictions. Many teenagers, when encountering bullying, manipulation or inappropriate content online, are reluctant to tell their parents. The reason is not that the situation is not serious, but that they are afraid of being blamed. Parents can start the conversation by talking about the videos their children often watch, the games they often play, or the events in the class group. First, listen to the children's thinking process, and then express

their own judgment. When children are willing to express, parents' guidance can really play a role.

Family education should also combine rules with trust. For younger children, supervision can be more detailed; for older teenagers, autonomy can be included in the agreement, such as allowing the child to specify their daily internet usage, the range of contacts, and the way to report abnormal situations. When there are signs of addiction, emotional outbursts, frequent record deletions, etc., parents should intervene promptly. In cases where necessary, they should work with teachers and psychological counselors to handle the issue, to avoid the problem being prolonged within the family.

4.4 Legal Level: Improving Online Protection Mechanisms for Minors

The key at the legal level is not just to formulate principles, but to turn the protection of minors' online activities into enforceable rules. The platforms should clearly specify what content to block, how to handle issues within a few hours after discovery, who is responsible for retaining evidence, and who is responsible for reporting to the regulatory authorities. All these aspects should be clearly defined. For behaviors such as inducing donations, spreading violent and vulgar content, inciting law-breaking, and disclosing minors' privacy, clear penalties should be set, so that the platforms know what consequences they will face if they fail to fulfill their responsibilities.

For instance, if a school or a parent discovers that a certain account continuously sends insulting messages, requests photos, or induces transfers to minors, they should not merely make a verbal complaint. The correct approach is to first take screenshots of the chat records, the account homepage, the transfer pages, and the time information, and then submit the materials through the platform's reporting entry; for cases involving threats, extortion, or the dissemination of private information, report directly to the police. After the platform receives the report, it should complete the removal, account suspension, data retention, and feedback within the prescribed time limit.

The law enforcement mechanism also needs to keep up with the characteristics of online cases. For issues such as online bullying of minors, fraud inducement, and privacy infringement, special reception windows can be set up, with unified reporting channels and handling procedures. Parents and schools should know where to report, what materials to submit, and how long to expect a response. With clear rules, fixed procedures, and clear responsibilities, legal protection will not remain on paper, and the safety boundaries of minors in the online space will also be more solid.

4.5 Technical Level: Establishing an Intelligent Online Risk Early Warning System

The key point of technical prevention is not merely to restrict teenagers' internet usage, but to identify risks as early as possible and issue alerts promptly. Internet platforms generate a large amount of interactive data every day, including search records, comment contents, private message behaviors, recharge frequencies, login times, etc. Once there are abnormal changes in these data, they often indicate that teenagers are exposed to inappropriate content or have already been in risky situations such as being induced, bullied, or losing control. Establishing an intelligent early warning system can help shorten the time for problem detection and reduce the occurrence of serious consequences.

The construction of the early warning system should be carried out around the "identification - assessment - intervention" process. The platform can identify through keywords, monitor abnormal behaviors, and classify account risks, marking situations such as violent imitation, extreme remarks, frequent late-night logins, short-term high-reward recharges, and repeated joining of high-risk group chats. After the system issues an alert, it should not merely stop at the technical prompt stage but enter the manual review phase to determine whether the information is true, whether the risk persists, and then take measures such as restricting recommendations, pop-up reminders, temporary protection, and notifying guardians to avoid misjudgment from affecting normal use.

The technical means should also serve the synergy among schools, families and social governance.

For the high-risk behaviors identified under the minors' mode, the platform can simultaneously generate concise reports, enabling parents to understand where the abnormalities lie and allowing school psychological counselors to carry out intervention when necessary. The regulatory authorities can, based on the data types and handling results reported on the platform, check whether the enterprises have truly fulfilled their protection responsibilities. The more detailed the technical system is, the more timely the risk detection will be, and the more likely the prevention work will shift from post-event remediation to pre-event control.

5. Conclusion

The Internet has become an integral part of adolescents' daily lives, offering numerous opportunities for learning, communication, and entertainment. However, the digital environment also presents significant psychological and behavioral risks. Harmful online content, distorted social interactions, gaming addiction, and anonymity can contribute to the development of criminal psychology among adolescents.

Understanding the mechanisms through which the Internet influences adolescent behavior is essential for developing effective prevention strategies. This paper has highlighted the importance of a comprehensive approach that integrates social regulation, educational guidance, family involvement, legal protection, and technological innovation.

By fostering responsible Internet use and strengthening protective mechanisms, society can reduce the risks associated with online environments while preserving the benefits of digital technology. Ultimately, promoting healthy psychological development and ethical digital behavior among adolescents is a shared responsibility that requires collaboration among governments, educators, families, and technology companies.

References

- [1] Rong, C. (2025, December). *Social Media Influence on Criminal Psychology of Children and Adolescence*. In *2025 International Conference on Mental Growth and Human Resilience (MGHR 2025)* (pp. 319-327). Atlantis Press.
- [2] Brewer, R., Cale, J., Goldsmith, A., & Holt, T. (2018). *Young people, the internet, and emerging pathways into criminality: A study of Australian adolescents*. *International Journal of Cyber Criminology* 12(1):115-132. doi:10.5281/zenodo.1467853
- [3] Paat, Y. F., & Markham, C. (2021). *Digital crime, trauma, and abuse: Internet safety and cyber risks for adolescents and emerging adults in the 21st century*. *Social Work in Mental Health*, 19(1), 18-40.
- [4] Lukecha, I., Khanetska, N., & Rudenok, A. (2023). *Principles and approaches of psychological correction of victim behavior of adolescents on the internet*. *Psychology Travelogs*. doi:10.31891/pt-2023-3-20
- [5] Greenfield, P., & Yan, Z. (2006). *Children, adolescents, and the Internet: A new field of inquiry in developmental psychology*. *Developmental psychology*, 42(3), 391.
- [6] Yuzikova, N. (2022). *Criminology Research Of The Influence Of Internet Content On Interpersonal Communication And Behavior Of Minors*. *Baltic Journal of Legal and Social Sciences*, (3), 94-101.
- [7] Wissink, I. B., Asscher, J. J., & Stams, G. J. (2025). *Online Delinquent Behaviors of Adolescents: Parents as Potential "Influencers"?*. *International journal of offender therapy and comparative criminology*, 69(8), 898-920.
- [8] Jastrzębska, J. (2019). *Internet crime as a threat to children and adolescents*. *Kwartalnik Naukowy Fides et Ratio*, 37(1), 411-422.