
JUVENILE OFFENDER IN THE DIGITAL AGE: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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"Social media does not create crime, but it can certainly amplify the impulse to commit one."

ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, the digital revolution has transformed every aspect of human life, including the behavior, mindset, and social interactions of adolescents. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube, and TikTok have become integral to the lives of young people. While these platforms offer opportunities for learning, expression, and connection, they also pose serious challenges—especially in the context of juvenile delinquency. This paper seeks to critically examine the evolving phenomenon of juvenile offenders in the digital age and the multifaceted role that social media plays in influencing juvenile behavior.

The increasing exposure of minors to harmful, violent, or inappropriate content on social media is one of the key contributing factors to behavioral deviance. Peer pressure in online environments, the quest for validation through likes and shares, and the influence of digital "influencers" often encourage risky, aggressive, or illegal behavior among teenagers. Moreover, the anonymity and lack of real-time accountability in the digital space embolden some juveniles to engage in cyberbullying, hacking, identity theft, sexting, and even organized online fraud. In some reported cases, juveniles have used encrypted platforms to plan real-world offenses such as gang activities or vandalism.

Social media also contributes to the normalization of crime through the glamorization of violence, drugs, and anti-social behavior. Viral challenges, provocative content, and aggressive digital trends may push impressionable teens toward delinquency. In India, several cases in recent years have highlighted juveniles being involved in cybercrimes or engaging in harmful behavior under the influence of online trends.

This paper analyzes data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) and other recent studies to demonstrate a significant rise in cyber-related offenses committed by juveniles in India post-2020. The COVID-19

pandemic and resultant digital dependency have further widened the exposure of minors to potentially harmful online environments, often in the absence of proper supervision or digital literacy.

Legally, while the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 governs offenses by minors, its application in cyber-related cases remains under-explored. There exists a legal grey area in determining how to treat tech-savvy minors who commit serious offenses online. Questions also arise regarding the threshold of criminal responsibility in digital contexts, the need for specialized juvenile cyber cells, and whether current legal frameworks are equipped to handle these evolving digital threats.

The abstract argues for a multi-pronged approach involving legal reform, parental and institutional digital literacy, educational interventions, and ethical technology use. Schools, parents, and policymakers must work together to monitor, regulate, and educate children about the safe and responsible use of social media. The government must also invest in cybercrime prevention programs targeting juveniles, while tech companies must be held accountable for ensuring safer digital environments.

In conclusion, the digital age presents both opportunity and danger for today's youth. If left unchecked, the misuse of social media by juveniles can become a serious threat to social order. Therefore, it is imperative to balance freedom of digital expression with protective mechanisms that prevent juvenile delinquency in the online space.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has ushered in a digital revolution that has fundamentally altered the way people interact, communicate, and perceive the world around them. At the heart of this revolution lies social media—platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and YouTube—which have become deeply embedded in the daily lives of individuals, particularly the youth. While these platforms offer immense potential for education, creativity, and social engagement, they have also introduced significant risks, especially when it comes to children and adolescents. One of the most pressing concerns in this context is the increasing involvement of juveniles in deviant and criminal behaviors facilitated or influenced by social media. The phenomenon of the "juvenile offender in the digital age" is rapidly emerging as a critical area of study and intervention in criminology, psychology, education, and juvenile justice systems worldwide, including in India.

Juveniles, due to their developmental stage, are more susceptible to influence, peer pressure,

and risk-taking behaviors. Social media, with its constant barrage of images, videos, and interactions, creates an environment that can easily blur the lines between acceptable and unacceptable conduct. The need for social acceptance, the thrill of virtual fame, and the lack of real-world consequences often encourage young minds to engage in behaviors they might not otherwise consider. Whether it's cyberbullying, online harassment, data theft, impersonation, distribution of explicit content, or participating in viral and often dangerous challenges, the spectrum of social media-induced delinquency is broad and evolving.

One of the primary issues with social media is the illusion of anonymity and the perceived detachment from real-life repercussions. Many juveniles believe that actions taken online are not "real" or do not carry the same weight as those in the physical world. This misconception is reinforced by a lack of digital literacy, poor supervision, and the absence of early education on ethical internet use. Furthermore, content that glorifies crime, violence, drug use, and anti-social behavior is readily available and often algorithmically promoted, leading impressionable minds to normalize and even idolize such conduct.

The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified the dependence on digital platforms, as lockdowns forced educational, social, and recreational activities into the virtual space. With schools closed and physical peer interactions limited, many children turned to social media as their primary outlet for expression and connection. Unfortunately, this unregulated digital immersion has coincided with a noticeable increase in juvenile involvement in cyber offenses. According to recent data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), the number of cybercrimes involving minors in India has shown a worrying upward trend, with many cases involving children as young as 13 or 14.

From a legal and policy standpoint, this issue presents several complex challenges. The Indian legal system, governed by the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, has provisions to deal with juvenile offenders, but it often falls short when addressing cyber-related offenses. There remains a legal grey area when it comes to deciding the extent of culpability of a minor in a digital crime, especially in cases involving sophisticated technology or cross-border elements. Moreover, the law must strike a delicate balance between holding juveniles accountable and recognizing their capacity for reform and rehabilitation.

This paper aims to explore the intricate relationship between social media and juvenile offending in the digital age, with a focus on the Indian context. It seeks to understand the

psychological, social, and technological factors that contribute to such offenses, analyze the current legal framework, and offer recommendations for preventive and rehabilitative strategies. In doing so, it hopes to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how digital spaces shape youth behavior and what steps can be taken to ensure that these platforms are used as tools of empowerment rather than gateways to delinquency.

CONCEPT

The term “**juvenile offender**” traditionally refers to a person below the age of 18 who engages in conduct that would be considered criminal if committed by an adult. However, with the evolution of society and technology, the nature and scope of juvenile offenses have changed significantly, particularly in the digital age. The advent of the internet and widespread access to smartphones and digital platforms have created new opportunities, but also new dangers. Among these dangers is the growing trend of **juvenile involvement in digital or cyber-related offenses**, often facilitated or encouraged by the use of **social media**.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Telegram, TikTok, and YouTube have become a central part of adolescents' lives. While these platforms were designed for communication, entertainment, and social interaction, they now play a significant role in shaping the thoughts, behaviors, and values of young users. When misused or left unmonitored, they can become spaces where deviant behavior is learned, shared, and even celebrated.

1. Changing Nature of Juvenile Offenses

Traditionally, juvenile crimes included theft, vandalism, assault, truancy, or substance abuse. In the digital era, the spectrum has expanded to include **cyberbullying, sexting, online stalking, impersonation, hacking, pornography distribution, and participation in viral challenges** that often lead to harm. Many of these acts are carried out via social media, either in private or public forums.

Juveniles may not fully comprehend the legal implications of such actions. A teenager sharing explicit images or threatening messages might not see their behavior as “criminal,” particularly if it is normalized among peers or encouraged online. However, in legal terms, these acts can fall under **cybercrime, harassment, or exploitation**, leading to serious consequences.

2. The Influence of Social Media on Juvenile Behavior

Social media can act as a powerful **influencer and amplifier** of behavior, both positive and negative. For juveniles, whose cognitive development and moral judgment are still evolving, the desire for popularity, acceptance, and instant gratification can be overwhelming. The constant exposure to content that glorifies violence, crime, rebellion, or anti-social behavior can alter a young person's understanding of right and wrong.

Furthermore, **peer pressure**, which is a strong influence during adolescence, becomes magnified on digital platforms. A viral trend or online dare may compel a juvenile to perform risky or illegal acts for the sake of likes, views, or online fame. The visibility and permanence of online content also mean that one impulsive act can have long-term personal, social, and legal consequences.

3. Psychological and Social Factors

Juveniles who commit offenses online may not always be inherently delinquent. Many suffer from **psychological issues**, such as loneliness, depression, low self-esteem, or a history of trauma. The online world offers a form of escape or empowerment, and in that space, they may adopt identities or behaviors that they would not exhibit in real life.

Cyberbullying, for instance, is often a result of frustration or a need to assert control. In some cases, juveniles mimic the behavior they observe online, particularly if there are no consequences shown. Additionally, **lack of parental supervision, limited digital literacy, and inadequate school-based education** on internet ethics contribute to this growing issue.

4. Legal and Institutional Response

India's **Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015** addresses juvenile crimes and provides mechanisms for both punishment and rehabilitation. However, the law faces challenges in responding to offenses committed through technology. Questions arise regarding the capacity of law enforcement agencies to investigate such offenses, the role of social media companies in monitoring harmful content, and the judicial system's ability to balance punishment with reformation for young offenders.

Moreover, legal frameworks must consider the **differentiation between a child's intent and understanding**, especially in cyber offenses that require technical skills or are committed under online manipulation. Rehabilitation, counseling, and digital awareness must be emphasized rather than only retribution.

5. The Way Forward

Addressing juvenile offenses in the digital era requires a **multi-disciplinary and preventive approach**. Schools should incorporate **digital ethics, online safety, and emotional education** into their curriculum. Parents must be encouraged to monitor and guide their children's online activities with understanding rather than punishment. Law enforcement and judicial bodies must be trained in handling juvenile cyber offenses with sensitivity.

At the same time, **social media platforms must take more responsibility** by using AI-based monitoring tools to detect harmful behavior among users, especially minors. Features like age verification, content flagging, and moderation tools need to be stricter and more transparent.

JUVENILE OFFENDER: ANALYSIS OF THE LAWS

The **Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015**, is a landmark legislation in India that governs how the justice system deals with children who are in conflict with the law, including those involved in offenses arising in the digital environment, particularly on social media. With the growing use of the internet among minors and the rising number of technology-facilitated crimes, the Act plays a crucial role in addressing juvenile offenses related to cyberbullying, online harassment, distribution of explicit content, identity theft, and participation in harmful digital trends. As per **Section 2(13)** of the Act, a “child in conflict with law” is defined as a person who has not completed 18 years of age and is alleged to have committed an offense. This includes both traditional crimes and those committed through digital means, which are increasingly common among tech-savvy adolescents influenced by online content.

One of the significant features of the 2015 Act is the classification of offenses based on their severity—**petty, serious, and heinous**. Under **Section 2(33)**, heinous offenses are those for which the minimum punishment under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) or any other law is seven years or more. In the context of social media and digital crimes, this may include serious

offenses such as hacking into government systems, circulating child pornography, or blackmail using explicit content. For juveniles aged **16 to 18 years** who are alleged to have committed heinous crimes, the **Juvenile Justice Board (JJB)** is empowered under **Section 15** to conduct a **preliminary assessment**. This assessment determines whether the child has the mental and physical capacity to commit such an offense, understands its consequences, and committed it under particular circumstances. Based on this, the JJB may recommend that the juvenile be tried as an adult in the **Children's Court**, which can then impose stricter penalties as per the law.

Despite this provision for trying juveniles as adults in exceptional cases, the primary aim of the JJ Act remains **reformatory and rehabilitative**, not punitive. **Section 18** of the Act ensures that children found guilty are not sent to prison but rather placed in **Special Homes** where they can receive psychological counseling, education, vocational training, and digital literacy. The goal is to address the root causes of their behavior, including peer pressure, emotional trauma, or lack of awareness about the legality of online actions. Even in cases of digital crimes, the Act promotes **restorative justice** over retribution. Furthermore, under **Section 12**, bail is generally granted unless there are compelling reasons to believe that releasing the child would expose them to danger or further criminal behavior.

Another vital provision is **Section 19**, which protects children from long-term consequences by ensuring that any conviction under the Act does not lead to disqualification from jobs, education, or other future opportunities. This is especially important in cybercrime cases, where the offense may have been committed without full understanding or maturity. Additionally, **Section 25** mandates the **destruction of juvenile records** after a period, thereby giving them a clean slate and a chance to reintegrate into society. This is crucial in the digital context, where reputations can be permanently damaged due to the viral nature of social media content.

The Act also prohibits the most extreme punishments. **Section 21** clearly states that no child shall be sentenced to death or life imprisonment without the possibility of release, even if tried as an adult. Thus, while the law allows for stricter treatment of juveniles in cases of serious cyber offenses, it still upholds the principle of child welfare and the belief that children are capable of change. In conclusion, the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015 strikes a delicate balance between acknowledging the gravity of social media-related offenses and ensuring that the justice system remains child-centric. It empowers legal institutions to respond to the

complexities of the digital age while ensuring that juvenile offenders are rehabilitated and given an opportunity for a positive future.

The **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2022**, which replaces the Indian Penal Code (IPC), incorporates several provisions that are crucial in the context of juvenile offenses committed through or involving social media and digital technology. Though the BNS does not directly mention "juveniles" (as they are primarily governed under the **Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015**), the offenses that may be committed by juveniles in the digital space are well-defined and penalized under various sections of BNS. Here are the key provisions:

1. Section 66 – Publishing or Transmitting Obscene Material in Electronic Form

This section penalizes those who publish, transmit, or cause to be published any material which is obscene, especially on social media platforms. Juveniles may get involved in sharing or circulating such content without understanding the consequences.

- **Punishment:** Imprisonment up to 3 years and fine for the first conviction; up to 5 years and fine for subsequent offenses.
- **Relevant for:** Sexting, sharing explicit videos, and involvement in online sexual content.

2. Section 67 – Publishing or Transmitting Sexually Explicit Content

This provision targets the circulation of content that is sexually explicit in nature, especially on platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, or Telegram. Juveniles engaging in such acts—knowingly or as part of peer pressure—can be prosecuted under this section.

- **Punishment:** Up to 5 years for the first conviction, up to 7 years for subsequent convictions, along with fines.

3. Section 69 – Child Sexual Abuse Content (CSAC)

This is one of the most serious provisions relevant to juvenile involvement in social media crimes. It criminalizes the creation, possession, publication, or distribution of **child sexual abuse material**, even if shared casually or unknowingly.

- **Punishment:** Minimum 5 years, which may extend up to 7 years with fine.

4. Section 73 – Cyberbullying and Online Harassment

This includes sending threatening, insulting, or harassing messages through digital means. Many juveniles are involved in cyberbullying unknowingly, treating it as a joke or peer challenge.

- **Punishment:** Up to 3 years and fine.
- **Relevant Acts:** Cyberstalking, doxxing, online threats, character defamation through social media

5. Section 86 – Identity Theft and Impersonation

Juveniles sometimes create fake social media profiles or hack into others' accounts for fun or revenge. This section criminalizes impersonation and misuse of digital identity.

- **Punishment:** Up to 3 years and fine.

6. Section 113 – Abetment of Suicide (Including Cyberbullying Consequences)

If cyberbullying or harassment by a juvenile leads to self-harm or suicide by another individual, this provision becomes applicable.

- **Punishment:** Up to 10 years imprisonment.

While the **BNS, 2022** defines offenses and penalties, juveniles charged under these sections will be tried under the framework of the **Juvenile Justice Act, 2015**, which determines whether they should be tried as adults (if aged 16–18 and involved in heinous crimes) or be sent for reformation. Thus, **BNS defines the offense, but JJ Act governs the trial and punishment based on age and mental capacity.**

CONCLUSION

In today's digital age, social media has transformed how young people interact, learn, and express themselves. Platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and WhatsApp have become virtual spaces for communication and self-exploration. However, this digital exposure

has also brought new challenges, including an alarming rise in juvenile involvement in cybercrimes. Whether through cyberbullying, online harassment, data theft, sharing explicit content, or participation in harmful trends, juveniles often engage in online activities that may amount to punishable offenses—knowingly or unknowingly.

The digital environment, characterized by anonymity, instant sharing, and peer pressure, can blur the lines between right and wrong for adolescents. Many juveniles commit such offenses without fully understanding the legal or emotional consequences. The need of the hour is not only strict regulation but a balanced legal approach that recognizes the unique status of juveniles as individuals still undergoing psychological and emotional development.

In India, this balance is maintained through the **Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015**, and more recently, through the provisions of the **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2022**, which replaces the Indian Penal Code. The **JJ Act, 2015** is built on the principle of *reformatory justice*. It treats juveniles not merely as offenders but as children in need of care, protection, and guidance. The Act establishes Juvenile Justice Boards (JJBs) to adjudicate juvenile cases and ensures that the child's background, mental condition, and circumstances are assessed before determining the course of action.

Importantly, **Section 15** of the JJ Act allows for a **preliminary assessment** in cases of heinous offenses committed by juveniles aged 16–18. If it is found that the juvenile had sufficient mental capacity and intention, the JJB may recommend that the case be tried under the adult system. However, the underlying principle remains focused on **reformation rather than punishment**.

On the other hand, the **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2022** has updated legal provisions to address the growing menace of cyber and digital crimes. For example:

- **Section 66** penalizes the publication or transmission of obscene material in digital form.
- **Section 67** deals with sexually explicit digital content.
- **Section 69** criminalizes the circulation of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM).
- **Section 73** addresses online harassment and cyberbullying.

- **Section 86** criminalizes identity theft and online impersonation.

These provisions are highly relevant in cases where juveniles commit offenses using social media platforms. However, the trial and rehabilitation of such juveniles remain under the jurisdiction of the **JJ Act**, ensuring a child-friendly legal process.

Together, the **JJ Act, 2015** and the **BNS, 2022** create a legal ecosystem that balances the seriousness of digital crimes with the developmental needs and reformatory rights of juveniles. While the **BNS ensures accountability**, the **JJ Act provides a chance for reform**, aiming to reintegrate the juvenile into society with improved awareness and behavior.

In conclusion, tackling juvenile delinquency in the digital era requires more than legal tools—it demands **digital literacy, parental supervision, ethical education, and strong policy implementation**. The legal framework is evolving, but it must be supported by proactive steps from families, schools, tech companies, and civil society. Only then can we ensure that technology becomes a tool for empowerment, not deviance, and that our youth grow up to be responsible digital citizens—not misguided offenders.

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