



## Pathology of Cyber Threats (Instagram) Among Adolescents

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The objective of the present study was to investigate the pathology of cyber threats (Instagram) among adolescents.

**Methods and Materials:** The research method was qualitative with thematic analysis and applied in nature. The participant community included 13 experts in the field of cyberspace who were selected through purposive sampling. The research tool was semi-structured interviews. The validity of the data was examined through face validity and by other experts, and the reliability was assessed using the recoding method, resulting in a reliability score of 0.83. Data analysis was conducted manually using the coding method.

**Findings:** The findings identified 29 threats, including time-wasting, weakening beliefs, individual isolation, personality weakness, reduced individual abilities, decreased family relationships and interactions, cultural challenges and conflicts, incompatibility with family, abnormal behaviors within the family environment, emotional detachment from family, reduced real social relationships, changes in beliefs and cultural patterns, breaking societal norms - responsibility evasion and creation of social problems, academic decline, reduced study time, academic theft, promotion of sexual corruption - sexual crisis, early maturity, sexual deviation, and dissemination of harmful sexual information as the harms of cyberspace (Instagram). These were categorized into core codes (individual, familial, educational, social, and sexual harms).

**Conclusion:** It can be concluded that cyberspace, despite its numerous and impactful opportunities in life, also has various harms that can be mitigated through planning and education on the correct use of cyberspace, particularly Instagram.

**Keywords:** virtual social media, sexual risk-taking, Instagram, adolescents.

## 1. Introduction

With the emergence of virtual social networks, a new form of life has developed in cyberspace, significantly differing from traditional interpersonal relationships and leaving an undeniable impact on social interactions (Madsen et al., 2024; Strohmeier & Gradinger, 2022). Virtual social media are among the most popular media, particularly among adolescents. The interactive features and social relationship platforms are some reasons for their high popularity. These media, with the capabilities they offer users, have become one of the top five priorities for internet users (Deldari et al., 2023). Individuals can connect with a wide range of people and share their interests across various fields. In virtual social networks, individuals can create an ideal identity and develop their virtual interactions based on that desired identity (Tombul & Sari, 2021). The appearance of these media is collectivist, but they lead to individualism. Nowadays, cultural transformations have led people to prefer extensive communications with the world around them while being alone (Puchkova et al., 2017). Social networks meet this demand. These media, through the various services they provide to their users, have a greater impact on life, society, and social behaviors, with different functions in economic, political, cultural, social, and communication aspects. According to experts, increased communication reduces face-to-face contact (Kee et al., 2022).

Social networks play a fundamental role in global media equations with their virtual collectivism. These websites, besides enabling virtual networking, allow users to take advantage of various internet opportunities, including searching, reading, sharing news, uploading photos and videos, writing notes, and joining different groups, thus increasing user engagement with social networks (Maloney et al., 2020). Cyberspace is shaped by social structures, and the growth of technology, media convergence, and related issues have had different outcomes in various social conditions. Internet social networks are platforms that enable users to share their interests, thoughts, and activities with others, who in turn share their own with them. A social network is a collection of web-based services that allow individuals to create public or private profiles, communicate with other network members, share their resources, and use others' public profiles to find new connections (Boichuk et al., 2023).

The advent of modern communication technologies, along with the transformations of cyberspace and the

emergence of new phenomena such as the internet, satellites, mass media, and virtual social networks, has introduced serious competitors to the family in socialization. Among the diverse and new media, virtual social networks are one of the most popular worldwide, rapidly increasing with the growth of mobile technology and easier access for people (Lubenets et al., 2023).

Instagram is one of the many social networks that have attracted a large audience in Iran, allowing users to upload photos and videos. With the restriction of Telegram in Iran, the population of Farsi-speaking users on this social network increased. Among the numerous features Instagram offers, live streaming is notable (Belanche et al., 2021). Using social networks, including Instagram, requires time, leading individuals to limit their interactions with others. Thus, it is accurate to say that gradual use of social networks leads to a form of addiction, severely limiting and disrupting relationships with family and close ones. Excessive use of virtual social media, including Instagram, results in extreme individualism and a decline in social interactions. Family members often become strangers to each other, having nothing to say and lacking emotional and excitement appeal. One current societal issue is the lack of awareness among adolescents about risky sexual behaviors which unfortunately leads to a hopeless future and a generation with physical and mental illnesses, causing irreparable social, economic, and cultural problems. Preventing these issues through proper education and timely information dissemination can significantly reduce these problems. With changes in cultural patterns and lifestyles and their impact on the body management of girls, and the body's reflection in modern life, the identity, power, and participation of adolescent girls, the importance of body management as an indicator, and the significance of lifestyle have increased (Norozi et al., 2018).

Tajbakhsh and Goodarzi (2022) concluded that the correlation between the cognitive and communicative dimensions of virtual social networks with youth identity is significant, with the communicative dimension having the highest correlation with the religious identity dimension and the cognitive dimension with the political identity dimension. Overall, the results indicate that the cognitive and communicative dimensions of virtual social networks have impacted the identity of young people in West Azerbaijan Province, although this impact was weak (Tajbakhsh & Goudarzi, 2022). Borbour and Tajik Esmaili (2022) found that the frequency of checking Instagram and the history of Instagram use predicted the social identity of

women in Tehran (Borbou & Tajik Esmaili, 2022). Abrouz and Kord (2021) found an inverse and significant relationship between risky behaviors and cyberspace dimensions with the quality of life of tenth-grade students. Multivariate regression results showed that among risky behaviors, alcohol consumption had the highest variance and opposite-sex relationships the lowest variance. Among cyberspace dimensions, value conflict had the highest variance, and social isolation the lowest variance in predicting life quality changes (Abrouz & Kord, 2021). Akbarzadeh Jahromi et al. (2019) concluded that Instagram usage is related to body management, with women following celebrities and fashion pages having higher levels of body management both in attitudes and behaviors (Akbarzadeh Jahromi et al., 2020). Lin et al. (2020) found that media exposure to sexual content predicted early sexual intercourse, unsafe sex, and multiple sexual partners. Increased exposure to media practices heightened the likelihood of risky sexual behaviors (Lin et al., 2020). Scirrotto Drame (2016) found that participants exposed to highly attractive media images had negative shifts in mood and body image satisfaction, while participants in other conditions experienced positive changes in these variables (Scirrotto Drame, 2016).

Adolescence is a developmental stage where various behaviors, including risky sexual behaviors, may endanger individual health (Peres et al., 2008). Research indicates that biological characteristics, developmental cycle, socioeconomic status, family characteristics, peer influence, and media are significant factors affecting risky sexual activities among youth (Amare et al., 2019). Additionally, virtual social media can threaten individuals' social security, as these powerful information tools, sometimes called information explosions, also pose threats and dangers to society, particularly adolescents. Today, a significant portion of crimes in the computer, internet, and cyberspace fields target social security (Talebi et al., 2021).

Thus, it is clear that cyberspace, as a new communication technology, has introduced new perspectives and social connections, alongside its advantages, bringing about irreversible harms, highlighting the necessity for such research. Previous studies show that most research in this field has examined the effects of cyberspace and the internet on adolescents. However, few studies have addressed adolescents' issues and problems related to body management and sexual risk-taking. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the pathology of cyber threats (Instagram) among adolescents.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study employed a qualitative research method with thematic analysis and was applied in nature. The participant community consisted of some cyberspace experts identified through their backgrounds and experiences via recommendations and Google searches. Accordingly, 13 experts were selected using purposive sampling. Theoretical sampling criteria were used to ensure maximum diversity among the samples. Additionally, theoretical saturation was the criterion for determining the sample size, continuing interviews until no new points or concepts emerged.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

The primary method for collecting information in this study was semi-structured interviews, designed to obtain specific information through a predetermined list of interview questions. Permission and suitable interview times were coordinated with the experts, and all interviews were conducted in the respective organizations and offices of the experts. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. The selection criteria for experts were their knowledge of cyberspace threats to adolescents. The interviews comprised several key and open-ended questions.

### 2.3. Data analysis

The data analysis process in this study followed a rigorous qualitative approach, utilizing thematic analysis to identify and categorize key themes from the semi-structured interviews. Initially, open coding was performed, where 100 initial categories were identified from the interview transcripts. This was followed by axial coding, which involved establishing connections between the subcategories, resulting in 49 axial categories. Finally, these were grouped into 15 main concepts. The coding process adhered to grounded theory principles, ensuring that the closest concept was assigned to the smallest meaningful part of the data. The validity of the data was confirmed through face validity and expert review, while reliability was ensured using the recoding method, with a resulting reliability score of 0.83. Manual coding was employed for the data analysis, providing a detailed and nuanced understanding of the identified themes and their interrelationships.

### 3. Findings and Results

Initially, some characteristics of the experts in the study are presented. According to the results, 53.8% of the respondents were male, and 46.2% were female. Most respondents had a master's degree, accounting for 69.2% of the sample. Bachelor's degree holders had the lowest frequency at 7.7%. According to the results, 23.1% of the respondents had a doctoral degree. The highest frequency was for individuals with 10 to 15 years of work experience, accounting for 38.5% of the total frequency.

In the open coding stage, the interview texts and questionnaires were thoroughly reviewed, and 100 initial categories were identified. In the axial coding stage, relationships were established between the identified subcategories, resulting in 49 axial categories, which were ultimately grouped into 15 main concepts. The process of extracting codes and categorizing concepts was based on the principles of coding in grounded theory, assigning the closest concept to the smallest meaningful part of the collected data.

**Table 1**

*Axial Coding of Individual Harms*

Phrases/Content	Open Coding	Axial Coding
Participant 1 mentions that adolescents spend a significant amount of time on social networks doing things that are not useful, leading to wasted time and resulting in them being often silent and bored. Participant 6 believes that students, by spending time on these networks, fall behind their classmates academically and are guided towards wrong and aimless paths.	Wasting Time	Individual Harms
Another participant points out that the information exchanged on these networks creates conflicts for the individual due to its inconsistency, often being flashy and useless, leading to incorrect mental orientations in adolescents (Participant 9).	Useless Information	
Another expert mentions that cyberspace, especially Instagram, requires management in usage; otherwise, individuals may deviate from their ethical paths after a while (Participant 3).	Weakening Beliefs	
Expert 5 states that one of the problems active adolescents in these networks face is isolation and gradually becoming depressed.	Individual Isolation	
Participant 4 notes that some adolescents encounter personalities on social networks and, considering them important, accept their personality without any censorship, even doubting their own personality and behaviors.	Personality Weakness	
Expert 8 claims that these networks often lead to boredom and impatience in adolescents, with them seeking false excitement. Another participant says that decisiveness and decision-making abilities are essential, but these kids are weak in these areas, being more emotional and impulsive (Participant 12).	Weakness in Individual Abilities	

**Table 2**

*Axial Coding of Familial Harms*

Phrases/Content	Open Coding	Axial Coding
Expert 9 mentions that due to excessive activity in these networks, students gradually reduce their interactions with their families and are drawn to their peers and like-minded individuals, possibly leading them away from the family unit (Participant 12).	Decreased Family Interactions	Familial Harms
Participant 1 indicates that students' family culture and traditions are influenced by cultural promoters on these networks, directing them towards foreign cultures.	Cultural Challenges and Conflicts	
Some parents complain about increased aggression in their children since they started using social networks (Participant 10). Another participant mentions a client who constantly argued with family members after engaging in cyberspace, undergoing significant appearance changes (Participant 3).	Family Incompatibility	
Expert 7 notes that parents of these students complain about increased behavioral and appearance anomalies within the family environment.	Abnormal Family Behaviors	
When students are constantly on their phones, empathy and intimacy with family members decrease, leading to a kind of alienation within the family unit (Participant 4). Emotionally, the individual may not have a proper state within the family, potentially leading to expulsion from the family unit, causing behavioral anomalies (Participant 7).	Emotional Detachment from Family	
The situation for students also increases family problems. Expert 3 says that controlling such students in the family is difficult, requiring intelligent management to prevent them from falling into behavioral, ethical, and other problems.	Increased Family Problems	

**Table 3**

*Axial Coding of Social Harms*

Phrases/Content	Open Coding	Axial Coding
Participant 5 mentions that excessive activity in these networks gradually leads to a reduction in real social relationships. Participant 3 indicates that one issue is the superficial nature of interactions with classmates.	Decreased Real Social Interactions	Social Harms
Observing someone who is active in virtual society but isolated from real society, suffering from behavioral and psychological gaps (Participant 5). These individuals are often on their phones, avoiding their surrounding society and finding their role models in virtual spaces (Participant 9).	Social Isolation	
Participants' role models gradually change, often replaced by foreign figures with little understanding of them. When network administrators' values are promoted, they leave no room for the individual's values and beliefs, causing identity and behavioral confusion (Participant 6).	Change in Beliefs and Cultural Patterns	
For students, societal norms lose their initial value, leading to societal disorder and foreign cultural aspirations (Participant 9).	Breaking Societal Norms	
Students who spend too much time on these networks neglect certain tasks, such as cooperation and responsibility in classwork. Unbounded friendships lead to increased social problems and conflicts (Participant 11).	Avoiding Responsibility and Creating Social Problems	
A client had spread harmful images and videos among students, increasing school corruption and normalizing irresponsible behavior (Participant 7). It's easy to share personal information through these networks, undermining personal privacy (Participant 13).	Spreading Corruption and Defamation	

**Table 4**

*Axial Coding of Academic Harms*

Phrases/Content	Open Coding	Axial Coding
One reason for academic weakness in some adolescents is their activity in social networks, leading them towards luxury and aggressive behavior (Participant 3). Another client had dropped out due to excessive activity in these networks, developing luxurious tendencies (Participant 10).	Academic Decline	Academic Harms
Participant 4 notes that academic procrastination becomes prevalent. Participant 7 indicates that academic values lose importance. Expert 9 mentions that adolescents' activity in these networks leads to mental preoccupation and reduced attention in class.	Inattention to Academic Matters	
Participant 6 points out that students who spend most of their time on these networks have no time for studying. A client mentioned spending several hours daily on social networks (Expert 1).	Reduced Study Time	
Participant 3 indicates that some active adolescents, when accidentally accessing exam questions before the test, take pictures and share them in virtual spaces.	Academic Theft	

**Table 5**

*Stages of Open, Axial, and Selective Coding*

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Selective (Core) Code
Wasting time - Useless information - Weakening beliefs - Individual isolation - Personality weakness - Weakness in individual abilities	Individual Harms	Cyber Harms
Decreased family interactions - Cultural challenges and conflicts - Family incompatibility - Abnormal behaviors in the family environment - Emotional detachment from family - Increased family problems	Familial Harms	
Decreased real social interactions - Social isolation - Change in beliefs and cultural patterns - Breaking societal norms - Avoiding responsibility and creating social problems - Spreading corruption and defamation	Social Harms	
Academic decline - Inattention to academic matters - Reduced study time - Academic theft	Academic Harms	
Sexual tension - Promoting sexual corruption - Sexual crisis - Early maturity - Sexual deviation - Dissemination of harmful sexual information - Spreading addiction culture		

According to above tables, 29 open codes and 5 axial codes (individual, familial, academic, social, and sexual harms) were identified.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The objective of the present study was to investigate the pathology of cyber threats (Instagram) among adolescents. The findings indicated that 5 types of harms, including individual, familial, academic, social, and sexual, are identified as consequences of cyberspace (Instagram). These findings are consistent with prior studies (Akbarzade Jahromi et al., 2020; Alsoubai et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2020; Tajbakhsh & Goudarzi, 2022; Talebi et al., 2021).

Explaining individual harms, school counselors in the study believe that students who excessively engage in these networks waste their time on unsuitable content, leading to weakened beliefs rooted in religious and cultural contexts. Dependence on this space also leads to individual isolation, personality weakness, and weakness in individual abilities, all considered individual harms of virtual social networks.

Regarding familial harms, internet use is time-consuming and affects social and family relationships, reducing family interaction. Students' activity in these networks creates a bicultural state for them. On one hand, they have their indigenous culture, and on the other, they face a culture created and guided by the main leaders of virtual social networks. This situation leads to cultural challenges and conflicts, making choices difficult. High adaptability to the environment and conditions is crucial for mental health (Talebi et al., 2021).

Social harms indicate that close and reliable social relationships are vital for mental health. Comparing individuals at different levels shows that the happiest people share quality friendships and family support in romantic relationships. Healthy individuals have stronger social attachments (Deldari et al., 2023). A student wandering in these networks leaves no time for social responsibilities. Accepting and fulfilling responsibilities comes with tension and suffering, while cyberspace activities provide pleasure. This pursuit of pleasure leads individuals to avoid social responsibilities. Other social harms include the spread of corruption and defamation, as cyberspace lacks control tools, allowing users to exchange any information freely.

Academic harms include academic decline, one of the notable academic issues. The relationship between mental health and academic progress has attracted many researchers. A mentally healthy student has good cognitive functioning, enabling better planning and improved academic performance, preventing academic decline. Inattention to academic matters is another harm (Belanche et al., 2021). As mentioned earlier, cyberspace activities

provide pleasure, while academic tasks involve effort and struggle. The more one engages in cyberspace, the more pleasure they derive, leading to more inattention and negligence towards academic matters. Excessive activity in these networks also leads to time wastage, reducing study time, another academic harm affecting students' mental health. Paying more attention to the variety in cyberspace leaves less time for gaining and applying necessary skills in non-virtual spaces.

#### 5. Limitations & Suggestions

One limitation of this study was using a sample of active Instagram users, limiting the determination of the sample size. A larger sample, including users with over 2 years of activity and high follower counts, could have been used to address this issue. Variables such as Instagram usage type and gender might have influenced the responses, affecting the results. Thus, generalizing the findings to other situations should be done cautiously. Considering the unique nature of Instagram, it is recommended that the dimensions investigated in this study also be examined in other social networks, comparing the results. Future research should explore structural approaches emphasizing elements like socioeconomic status and economic capital. Additionally, those involved with adolescents and young Instagram users should promote and disseminate a healthy and defensible religious culture to enhance societal piety.

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#### Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

#### Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

#### Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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### Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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