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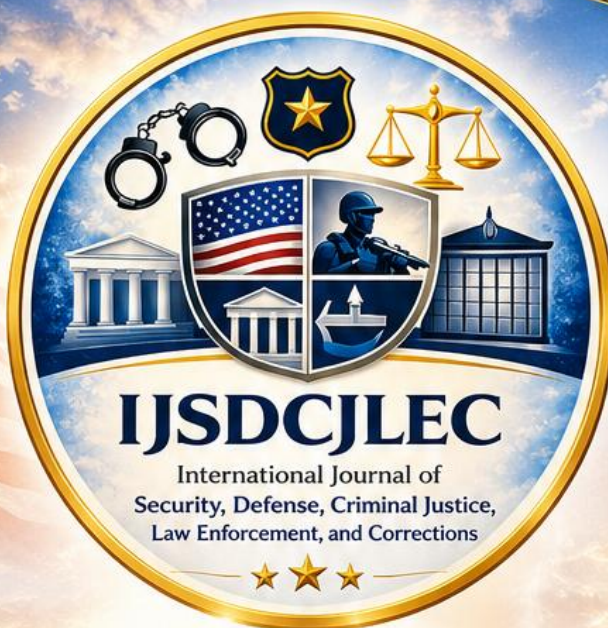
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**Social media exposure and deviant behavior influence among college students in Rizal Memorial Colleges, Inc.**

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**Abstract**

**Aim:** Social media provides college students with opportunities for communication, entertainment, learning, and self-expression, but it may also expose them to harmful online content, cyberbullying, and other behaviors that may influence deviant conduct. This study examined the level of social media exposure and deviant behavior influence among college students at Rizal Memorial Colleges, Inc. and explored the challenges they experienced in using social media.

**Methodology:** The study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The quantitative phase involved 350 college students enrolled during School Year 2025–2026. Social media exposure was examined in terms of interaction, entertainment, academics, and personalization, while deviant behavior influence was assessed in terms of suggestive substance use, cyberbullying, and suggestive sexual messages and poses. Median and Spearman's rho were used to analyze the quantitative data. The qualitative phase involved in-depth interviews with 25 purposively selected students from college departments. The interview data were analyzed thematically and integrated with the quantitative findings during interpretation.

**Findings:** Social media exposure was high overall (Mdn = 3.00), with academics rated very high (Mdn = 3.50) and interaction, entertainment, and personalization rated high (Mdn = 3.00 each). Deviant behavior influence was likewise high overall (Mdn = 3.00). A significant positive relationship was found between overall social media exposure and deviant behavior influence ( $\rho = .194, p < .001$ ). Significant relationships were particularly evident in suggestive substance use and suggestive sexual messages and poses. The qualitative findings identified negative comments, hacked accounts, and adverse emotional and behavioral effects as major challenges. Students coped by distancing themselves from negative accounts, making personal adjustments, and, in some instances, responding through retaliatory negative behavior. Participants also recognized the importance and benefits of responsible social media use for learning and communication.

**Conclusion:** Social media is deeply embedded in students' academic and social lives, but greater exposure is associated with greater reported influence from potentially deviant online content and interactions. Negative online encounters, account compromise, peer influence, and retaliatory responses may create risks relevant to cyber safety, crime prevention, and the promotion of responsible online behavior. The findings support the development of a school-based responsible social media program emphasizing digital citizenship, account security, critical evaluation of online information, respectful online communication, cyberbullying prevention, and awareness of applicable cybercrime laws. Such interventions may contribute to safer online environments and strengthen preventive efforts among college students.

**Keywords:** social media exposure, deviant behavior influence, cyberbullying, suggestive substance use, suggestive sexual messages, college students, mixed methods, criminology

**INTRODUCTION**

Social media has become a significant feature of contemporary life and has transformed how individuals communicate, exchange information, participate in communities, access educational resources, and interact with others. Among young people and college students, digital platforms provide opportunities for communication, learning, networking, entertainment, and self-expression. At the same time, the global expansion of online interaction has also

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created criminological and public safety concerns because digital environments may expose users to misinformation, harassment, cyberbullying, sexualized content, substance-related messages, negative peer influence, and other forms of harmful or potentially deviant online behavior (Andleeb et al., 2023; Azzaakiyyah, 2023; Al-Mamun et al., 2022; Kolhar et al., 2021; Rana et al., 2023; Shams et al., 2022; Vente et al., 2020).

From a crime prevention and criminological perspective, social media is not merely a communication environment. It is also a social space in which individuals may encounter potential offenders, suitable targets, harmful content, peer pressure, and varying levels of online guardianship. Digital interactions may therefore create opportunities for cybervictimization, cyberbullying, retaliation, and other forms of deviant conduct. Research further suggests that young people may be influenced by peer behavior and online interactions through processes involving observation, imitation, conformity, approval seeking, and retaliation (Goet, 2022; Hoang & Lan, 2024; Jiang, 2023; Laursen & Veenstra, 2021; Marttila et al., 2021).

These concerns are relevant not only to individual students but also to institutions responsible for promoting public safety and preventing harmful behavior. Understanding how students are exposed to problematic online content and interactions may contribute to preventive efforts involving cyber safety, digital citizenship, responsible online conduct, and awareness of behaviors that may result in victimization or involvement in cyber-related offenses. The growing intersection between social media use, deviant behavior, and cyber-related risks therefore presents an important area of inquiry for criminology and crime prevention (Cheng, 2023; Marttila et al., 2021; Vakhitova, 2025).

In the Philippine context, concerns regarding online behavior are particularly relevant because social media is widely used by young people for educational, social, and personal purposes. While digital platforms provide opportunities for communication and learning, they may also expose students to negative comments, cyberbullying, problematic peer interactions, and other harmful online experiences. These concerns have implications for schools, families, criminal justice practitioners, and other institutions involved in promoting safe and responsible behavior. The study's local review identified a need for more empirical evidence concerning the relationship between social media exposure and deviant behavior influence among college students in Davao City. Existing studies have examined juvenile delinquency, peer pressure, cyberbullying, and social media use, but fewer studies have combined quantitative evidence of the relationship between social media exposure and deviant behavior influence with qualitative accounts explaining how students experience, interpret, and respond to problematic online interactions (Mutia et al., 2025).

The research gap, therefore, lies in the limited availability of localized mixed-methods evidence that simultaneously examines the level of social media exposure, the level of deviant behavior influence, the statistical relationship between these variables, and the lived challenges and responses of college students when encountering problematic online experiences. Existing literature provides evidence regarding particular aspects of social media use, peer influence, cyberbullying, and deviant behavior; however, fewer studies integrate quantitative and qualitative evidence to explain how exposure to online environments may be associated with deviant behavior influence within the context of college students in Davao City.

Accordingly, this study examined social media exposure and deviant behavior influence among college students in Rizal Memorial Colleges, Inc. The quantitative phase established the levels of the two variables and tested their relationship, while the qualitative phase explored students' challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights regarding their online experiences. The explanatory sequential mixed-methods design enabled the qualitative findings to contextualize and elaborate the quantitative results.

The study contributes to criminology and security scholarship by providing localized evidence on the relationship between students' social media exposure and their reported influence from potentially deviant online behaviors. Its findings may be relevant to crime prevention and public safety initiatives by identifying online experiences and behavioral influences that may require preventive intervention. The results may also provide a basis for institutional programs that promote responsible social media use, cyber safety, digital citizenship, respectful online communication, and awareness of cyber-related offenses. In this way, the study extends its relevance beyond the immediate institutional setting by contributing evidence that may inform preventive strategies for safer online communities.

## **Review of Related Literature and Studies**

### **Social Media Exposure**

The literature reviewed in the study portrays social media as a multidimensional environment used for interaction, entertainment, academic activities, and personalization. Digital platforms provide students with opportunities to communicate, maintain relationships, access information, and support learning. At the same time, social media exposure may involve distraction, problematic use, privacy concerns, misinformation, negative comments, and exposure to potentially harmful content.



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Baria (2021) examined social media exposure in relation to academic performance, while other studies emphasized the educational, communicative, and social opportunities associated with online platforms (Andleeb et al., 2023; Azzaakiyyah, 2023; Goet, 2022; Kolhar et al., 2021; Rana et al., 2023). Taken together, these studies demonstrate that social media exposure is not a single or uniform experience. Students use digital platforms for multiple purposes, and the nature of their exposure may vary according to the content they encounter, the people with whom they interact, and the manner in which they use these platforms.

From a criminological and public safety perspective, this multidimensional nature of social media exposure is important because frequent or varied online engagement may increase opportunities for students to encounter harmful content, problematic interactions, cyberbullying, or other situations associated with victimization or deviant behavior. Thus, examining social media exposure according to interaction, entertainment, academics, and personalization provides a more specific basis for understanding how different forms of online activity may be associated with behavioral influence.

## Deviant Behavior and Peer Influence

The literature further indicates that deviant behavior may be influenced by peer relationships, perceived norms, media exposure, and opportunities for online interaction. Young people may observe the conduct of others, interpret social approval or disapproval, and respond to peer expectations and online interactions. In digital environments, these processes may occur repeatedly and across broader social networks.

Studies cited by the researcher reported associations between social media use and delinquent or deviant behavior, while research on peer influence emphasized the role of conformity, observation, and social learning in shaping young people's behavior (Cheng, 2023; Eteng et al., 2024; Hoang & Lan, 2024; Jiang, 2023; Laursen & Veenstra, 2021; Mutia et al., 2025). These findings support examining social media not only as a technological or communication tool but also as a social environment in which behavior can be observed, modeled, encouraged, challenged, or retaliated against.

For criminology and crime prevention, understanding these processes is important because exposure alone may not directly result in deviant behavior. Rather, behavioral influence may be shaped by the interaction between exposure, peer relationships, perceived norms, reinforcement, and individual responses to online experiences. The present study therefore examines deviant behavior influence in relation to suggestive substance use, cyberbullying, and suggestive sexual messages and poses.

## Cyberbullying and Harmful Online Content

Cyberbullying involves the use of digital communication to harass, threaten, humiliate, or otherwise harm another person. The literature reviewed in the study associates cyberbullying with emotional distress and negative social consequences (Bartlett, 2023; Mishna et al., 2022). Because cyberbullying occurs within digital environments that students regularly access, it represents an important concern for criminology, cyber safety, and preventive intervention.

Other studies address sexually suggestive online content and substance-related messages, highlighting the possibility that repeated exposure to certain forms of content may influence attitudes, perceptions, or behavioral norms (Pahn & Yang, 2019; Vente et al., 2020). These forms of exposure are relevant to the present study because online environments may repeatedly present students with behaviors that can be observed, evaluated, imitated, rejected, or normalized.

The literature therefore supports the need to examine not only whether students use social media but also the possible behavioral influences associated with the content and interactions they encounter. Such evidence may contribute to preventive efforts directed at cyberbullying, harmful online communication, and other forms of potentially risky or deviant online behavior.

## Philippine and Local Context

Philippine studies cited in the thesis point to the continuing relevance of peer pressure, family conditions, media exposure, and social media use in understanding youth deviance. Local literature also identifies cyberbullying and other problematic online behaviors as concerns requiring attention from educational institutions and other stakeholders involved in promoting safe and responsible behavior (Mutia et al., 2025).

However, there remains a need for localized evidence that examines social media exposure and deviant behavior influence together while also considering how students personally experience and respond to problematic online interactions. The present study addresses this need by focusing on college students in Rizal Memorial Colleges,



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Inc., Davao City, and by combining statistical evidence with students' accounts of their challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights.

This localized perspective may contribute to a better understanding of how broader concerns regarding social media, cyber safety, peer influence, and deviant behavior manifest within a specific educational and community context.

## **Synthesis and Research Gap**

The reviewed literature demonstrates that social media is neither inherently harmful nor inherently beneficial. Its consequences may depend on how students use digital platforms, the content and interactions they encounter, their peer environments, and the ways they respond to negative experiences (Andleeb et al., 2023; Kolhar et al., 2021; Laursen & Veenstra, 2021; Vakhitova, 2025).

The literature provides evidence concerning social media use, peer influence, cyberbullying, cybervictimization, and deviant or problematic behavior. However, the reviewed studies largely address particular dimensions of these concerns separately. The specific gap addressed by the present study is the limited localized mixed-methods evidence that integrates the quantitative measurement of social media exposure and deviant behavior influence with qualitative explanations of the challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights of college students regarding problematic online experiences.

Accordingly, the present study contributes to criminology and crime prevention scholarship by examining the statistical relationship between social media exposure and deviant behavior influence and then using qualitative evidence to explain how students experience and respond to negative online encounters. The integrated findings provide an empirical basis for preventive and institutional interventions promoting cyber safety, responsible social media use, respectful online behavior, and greater awareness of cyber-related risks.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The study is anchored in Routine Activity Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Cyber Lifestyle-Routine Activities Theory. These theories are appropriate because they provide complementary explanations for the relationship between students' social media exposure and deviant behavior influence.

### **Routine Activity Theory**

Routine Activity Theory, developed by Cohen and Felson (1979), explains crime and deviance through the convergence of a suitable target, a motivated offender, and the absence of capable guardianship. The theory emphasizes that opportunities for harmful or criminal behavior may arise from the routine activities through which individuals encounter potential offenders, targets, and varying levels of protection.

Applied to social media, routine activities such as posting, messaging, sharing information, interacting with peers, and communicating with unknown users may create opportunities for cybervictimization and other forms of deviant conduct. The extent and nature of students' online exposure may therefore influence the situations and interactions to which they are repeatedly exposed (Marttila et al., 2021; Vakhitova, 2025).

In the present study, Routine Activity Theory helps explain why different forms of social media exposure may create varying opportunities for students to encounter harmful content, problematic interactions, or situations involving cyberbullying and other potentially deviant behaviors.

### **Social Learning Theory**

Social Learning Theory, developed by Bandura (1977), explains how individuals may acquire behaviors by observing others and the consequences associated with those behaviors. Individuals may learn not only through direct experience but also by observing models and interpreting whether particular actions receive approval, attention, reinforcement, or negative consequences.

In social media environments, students may observe peers or online personalities engaging in bullying, substance-related behavior, sexualized posting, or retaliation. When particular forms of conduct receive attention, approval, or imitation, they may become more visible and potentially normalized within online communities (Bartlett, 2023; Jiang, 2023; Laursen & Veenstra, 2021).

In the present study, Social Learning Theory provides an explanation for how exposure to online behavior may become associated with deviant behavior influence through observation, imitation, peer reinforcement, and perceived social norms.



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## Cyber Lifestyle-Routine Activities Theory

Cyber Lifestyle-Routine Activities Theory extends routine activity principles to cyberspace by recognizing that online victimization and offending occur within digital environments where physical proximity and traditional conceptions of place are less important. Online routines, patterns of exposure, types of interaction, and levels of digital guardianship may influence opportunities for cyber-related victimization and offending (Marttila et al., 2021; Vakhitova, 2025).

This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant to the present study because students' regular use of social media may expose them to different forms of interaction, content, and online risks. It therefore helps explain the importance of examining the routine dimensions of social media exposure alongside behavioral influence.

## Integration of the Theories

Together, the three theories provide complementary explanations for the present study.

**Routine Activity Theory** explains how students' routine online activities may create opportunities for exposure to harmful interactions and potential victimization.

**Social Learning Theory** explains how students may observe, interpret, imitate, or normalize behaviors encountered through peers and online communities.

**Cyber Lifestyle-Routine Activities Theory** extends the analysis of opportunity and guardianship to digital environments and helps explain how patterns of online activity may influence exposure to cyber-related risks.

Collectively, these theories guide the design, analysis, and interpretation of the study. They support the examination of social media exposure as the independent variable and deviant behavior influence as the dependent variable. They also provide a framework for interpreting the qualitative findings concerning students' challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights.

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework presents social media exposure as the independent variable and deviant behavior influence as the dependent variable.

Social media exposure is examined in terms of:

- Interaction
- Entertainment
- Academics
- Personalization

Deviant behavior influence is examined in terms of:

- Suggestive substance use
- Cyberbullying
- Suggestive sexual messages and poses

The quantitative phase determines the levels of social media exposure and deviant behavior influence and examines the relationship between the two variables. The qualitative phase subsequently explores the challenges encountered by students, their coping mechanisms, and their insights regarding their social media experiences.

The qualitative findings are integrated with the quantitative results to provide a more comprehensive explanation of the relationship between social media exposure and deviant behavior influence. The integrated findings serve as the basis for a proposed program promoting responsible social media use, cyber safety, and preventive awareness.

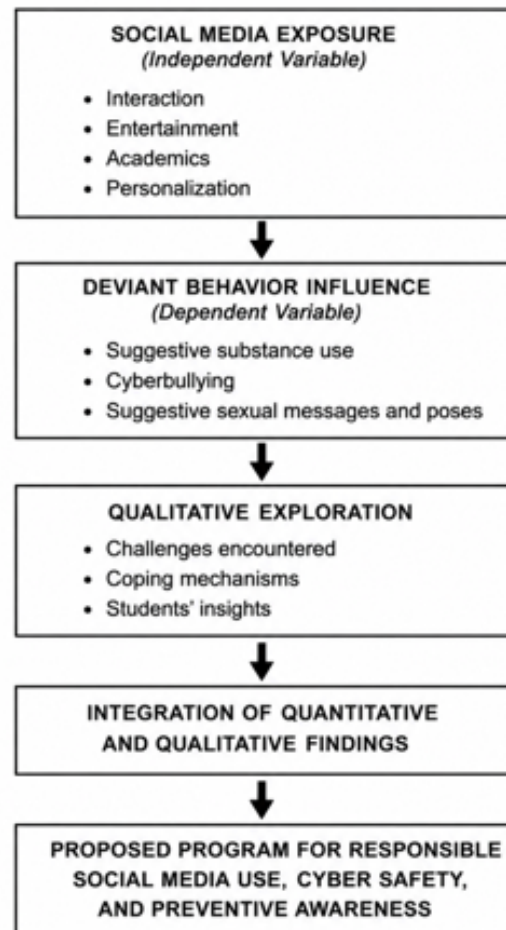


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**Figure 1.** *Conceptual Diagram*

## Statement of the Problem

Social media has become an important part of college students' academic, social, and personal lives. While digital platforms provide opportunities for communication, learning, entertainment, and self-expression, they may also expose students to cyberbullying, suggestive substance-related content, sexually suggestive messages and poses, negative peer interactions, and other forms of potentially harmful or deviant online behavior. These concerns are relevant to criminology and crime prevention because repeated exposure to harmful online interactions and content may influence attitudes, perceptions, responses, and behavior.

The increasing use of social media among young people also presents concerns related to cyber safety and the prevention of harmful online conduct. Understanding the relationship between students' social media exposure and deviant behavior influence may provide evidence that can support preventive interventions, responsible social media use, digital citizenship, and awareness of cyber-related risks. However, there remains a need to examine this relationship within the context of college students while also exploring how they experience and respond to problematic online interactions.

This study, therefore, investigates the level of social media exposure and deviant behavior influence among college students at Rizal Memorial Colleges, Inc. It also examines the relationship between these variables and explores the challenges encountered by students, their coping mechanisms, and their insights regarding social media use. The integrated findings are intended to serve as the basis for a proposed program promoting responsible social media use, cyber safety, and preventive awareness.



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## Research Objectives

### General Objective

To investigate and explain the relationship between social media exposure and deviant behavior influence among college students at Rizal Memorial Colleges, Inc.

### Specific Objectives

Specifically, the study aimed:

1. To determine the level of social media exposure among college students in terms of:
  - o interaction;
  - o entertainment;
  - o academics; and
  - o personalization.
2. To determine the level of deviant behavior influence among college students in terms of:
  - o suggestive substance use;
  - o cyberbullying; and
  - o suggestive sexual messages and poses.
3. To determine whether a significant relationship exists between social media exposure and deviant behavior influence among college students.
4. To identify and explore the challenges encountered by students in their social media exposure.
5. To explore the coping mechanisms and insights of students regarding their experiences with problematic online interactions.
6. To propose a program for responsible social media use, cyber safety, and preventive awareness based on the integrated findings of the study.

## Research Questions

In line with the objectives of the study, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of social media exposure among college students in terms of:
  - 1.1 interaction;
  - 1.2 entertainment;
  - 1.3 academics; and
  - 1.4 personalization?
2. What is the level of deviant behavior influence among college students in terms of:
  - 2.1 suggestive substance use;
  - 2.2 cyberbullying; and
  - 2.3 suggestive sexual messages and poses?
3. Is there a significant relationship between social media exposure and deviant behavior influence among college students?
4. What challenges do college students encounter in their exposure to and use of social media?
5. How do college students cope with problematic or negative online experiences, and what insights do they draw from these experiences?
6. What program for responsible social media use, cyber safety, and preventive awareness may be proposed based on the integrated findings of the study?

## Hypothesis

H<sub>0</sub>: There is no significant relationship between social media exposure and deviant behavior influence among college students at Rizal Memorial Colleges, Inc.

## METHODS

### Research Design

The study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. In this design, quantitative data were collected and analyzed first to determine the levels of social media exposure and deviant behavior influence and to examine the relationship between the two variables. The quantitative findings were subsequently followed by a



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qualitative phase designed to explain and contextualize the statistical results, particularly the challenges encountered by students, their coping mechanisms, and their insights regarding problematic or negative online experiences.

The two phases were integrated during the interpretation of the findings. The qualitative themes were used to elaborate, explain, and provide context for the quantitative results rather than treating the two forms of evidence independently (Ivankova et al., 2006). This design was appropriate because the study sought not only to determine whether a relationship existed between social media exposure and deviant behavior influence but also to understand how students experienced and responded to problematic social media interactions.

## Participants and Sampling

### Quantitative Phase

The quantitative population consisted of 2,789 enrolled college students at Rizal Memorial Colleges, Inc., Davao City, during School Year 2025–2026. Using Slovin's formula with a margin of error of 0.05, a sample size of 350 respondents was determined. The sample allocation was determined proportionally based on the population of each of the five academic programs, and respondents were selected through stratified random sampling. Social media exposure was examined in terms of interaction, entertainment, academics, and personalization, while deviant behavior influence was assessed in terms of suggestive substance use, cyberbullying, and suggestive sexual messages and poses. Median and Spearman's rho were used to analyze the quantitative data.

**Table 1**

*Distribution of Quantitative Respondents*

| Program                       | Population   | Sample     | Percentage    |
|-------------------------------|--------------|------------|---------------|
| BS Agriculture                | 170          | 21         | 6.00          |
| Business Administration       | 336          | 42         | 12.00         |
| Arts and Science              | 192          | 24         | 6.86          |
| BS Criminology                | 1,531        | 192        | 54.86         |
| Teacher Education (BSED/BEED) | 560          | 71         | 20.29         |
| <b>Total</b>                  | <b>2,789</b> | <b>350</b> | <b>100.00</b> |

### Qualitative Phase

The qualitative phase involved 25 purposively selected college students, with five participants from each of the five academic programs represented in the study. The participants were aged 18 years and above and met the established eligibility criteria. They were selected based on their ability and willingness to provide relevant and meaningful accounts of their experiences concerning social media exposure, problematic online interactions, coping mechanisms, and related insights. The qualitative participants were selected from a group separate from the quantitative respondents. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. The resulting qualitative findings were then integrated with the quantitative results during the interpretation of the findings.

### Research Instruments

The quantitative phase used a survey questionnaire consisting of items measuring social media exposure and deviant behavior influence. Items measuring social media exposure were adapted from Baria (2021), while items measuring deviant behavior influence were adapted from Muia (2016).

Before the administration of the instrument, the questionnaire was reviewed by the research adviser and a panel of experts to assess its appropriateness, clarity, and relevance to the objectives of the study. The instrument was subsequently revised based on the feedback obtained from the review process.

A pilot test was conducted among 30 students who were not included in the actual study. The reliability test yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.902, indicating high internal consistency of the questionnaire.

The quantitative instrument used a four-point response scale:



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**Table 2**

*Four-Point Response Scale*

| Scale Verbal Interpretation |           |
|-----------------------------|-----------|
| 4                           | Very High |
| 3                           | High      |
| 2                           | Low       |
| 1                           | Very Low  |

For the qualitative phase, a semi-structured in-depth interview guide was developed in accordance with the qualitative component of the study. The guide contained questions designed to explore the challenges encountered by students in their social media exposure, their coping mechanisms when facing problematic or negative online experiences, and their insights regarding responsible social media use. The interview guide was reviewed and validated before its administration.

## Data Collection Procedure

Before the conduct of data collection, the researcher obtained the necessary permission from the appropriate institutional authorities to conduct the study among the identified participants. The participants were informed of the purpose and procedures of the study and were provided with the necessary information regarding their participation. For the quantitative phase, survey questionnaires were administered to the selected college students at Rizal Memorial Colleges, Inc., Davao City. The respondents were given sufficient time to complete the questionnaire. Upon retrieval, the completed questionnaires were checked for completeness and prepared for coding and statistical analysis. Quantitative data collection was conducted from December 18, 2025, to January 29, 2026.

For the qualitative phase, eligible participants were invited to participate in individual in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted separately from the quantitative data collection and were scheduled at a time and place convenient for the participants. With the participants' permission, the interviews were recorded or documented for transcription and analysis. The interview data were subsequently transcribed and, when necessary, translated into English while preserving the intended meaning of the participants' responses. Qualitative data collection was conducted from January 30, 2026, to February 27, 2026.

All data collection activities were conducted at Rizal Memorial Colleges, Inc., Davao City, Philippines, in accordance with the established procedures of the study.

## Treatment of Data and Data Analysis

The quantitative data were coded, compiled, and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Median scores were used to determine the levels of:

- social media exposure in terms of interaction, entertainment, academics, and personalization; and
- deviant behavior influence in terms of suggestive substance use, cyberbullying, and suggestive sexual messages and poses.

Spearman's rho was used to determine whether a statistically significant relationship existed between social media exposure and deviant behavior influence. The hypothesis was tested at the 0.05 level of significance.

For the qualitative phase, the interview data were transcribed, translated into English, and analyzed through thematic analysis following the approach described by Braun and Clarke (2022). The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns and themes related to the challenges encountered by students, their coping mechanisms, and their insights regarding their social media experiences.

Consistent with the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the quantitative and qualitative datasets were initially analyzed separately. The findings were subsequently integrated during the interpretation stage. The qualitative themes were used to explain, elaborate, and contextualize the quantitative results, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between social media exposure and deviant behavior influence.

## Ethical Considerations

The study observed ethical principles throughout the conduct of the research. Institutional permission was secured prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or adverse consequences.



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Before participation, each respondent was provided with an informed consent form explaining the purpose, procedures, and nature of the study, as well as their rights as participants.

Participation proceeded only after the respondents voluntarily signed the informed consent form. Privacy and confidentiality were maintained by protecting participants' personal information and ensuring that research data were not disclosed to unauthorized third parties.

The survey and interviews were conducted in a safe and appropriate setting, with reasonable measures taken to minimize potential risks or discomfort. No formal ethics approval was obtained from an institutional research ethics committee; therefore, no ethics approval or reference number is reported.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented according to the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The quantitative findings on social media exposure, deviant behavior influence, and the relationship between the variables are presented first. These findings are followed by the qualitative results concerning the challenges encountered by students, their coping mechanisms, and their insights regarding social media use. The quantitative and qualitative findings are subsequently integrated to provide a broader interpretation of the phenomenon.

### Quantitative Findings

#### Level of Social Media Exposure

**Table 3**

*Level of Social Media Exposure Among College Students*

| Indicator       | Median      | Descriptive Equivalent |
|-----------------|-------------|------------------------|
| Interaction     | 3.00        | High                   |
| Entertainment   | 3.00        | High                   |
| Academics       | 3.50        | Very High              |
| Personalization | 3.00        | High                   |
| <b>Overall</b>  | <b>3.00</b> | <b>High</b>            |

As shown in Table 3, the overall level of social media exposure among the respondents was high (Mdn = 3.00). Among the indicators, academics obtained the highest median (Mdn = 3.50), interpreted as very high, while interaction, entertainment, and personalization each obtained a median of 3.00, interpreted as high.

The findings indicate that social media formed an important part of the respondents' academic and social activities. The particularly high rating for academics suggests that the respondents reported substantial use of social media for activities related to obtaining information, communicating with classmates, and supporting learning and research-related tasks. This interpretation is consistent with the literature cited in the study regarding the educational and communication functions of social media among students (Andleeb et al., 2023; Baria, 2021; Kolhar et al., 2021; Rana et al., 2023).

The qualitative findings provided additional context for this result. Participants described social media as useful for obtaining information, communicating with family members and peers, and supporting school-related activities. These accounts complement the quantitative finding that the academic dimension obtained the highest rating. From a criminological and preventive perspective, the finding is important because the high use of social media for legitimate academic and communication purposes means that preventive approaches should not simply focus on restricting social media use. Rather, preventive efforts may focus on promoting safer and more responsible use while preserving its legitimate educational and interpersonal benefits.

#### Level of Deviant Behavior Influence

**Table 4**

*Level of Deviant Behavior Influence Among College Students*

| Indicator                | Median | Descriptive Equivalent |
|--------------------------|--------|------------------------|
| Suggestive Substance Use | 3.00   | High                   |
| Cyberbullying            | 3.00   | High                   |



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| Indicator                            | Median Descriptive Equivalent |             |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------|
| Suggestive Sexual Messages and Poses | 3.00                          | High        |
| <b>Overall</b>                       | <b>3.00</b>                   | <b>High</b> |

Table 4 shows that the overall level of reported deviant behavior influence was high ( $Mdn = 3.00$ ). Suggestive substance use, cyberbullying, and suggestive sexual messages and poses each obtained a median of 3.00 and were interpreted as high.

The finding indicates that the respondents reported a high level of perceived influence associated with the selected forms of potentially deviant online content or behavior measured in the study. This result should not be interpreted as evidence that all respondents personally engaged in substance use, cyberbullying, or sexually suggestive behavior. Rather, it reflects the construct of deviant behavior influence as operationalized and measured by the research instrument (Cheng, 2023; Hoang & Lan, 2024; Zheng et al., 2024; Vente et al., 2020).

The high rating for cyberbullying was further contextualized by the qualitative findings. Participants described experiences involving fake news, hateful comments, criticism, bashing, harassment, and other negative online interactions. Some participants also described emotional effects, reduced confidence, and difficulties in maintaining focus. These findings illustrate how harmful online interactions may involve both experiences of victimization and, in some cases, retaliatory responses (Mishna et al., 2022; Bartlett, 2023).

The findings are relevant to crime prevention and public safety because they identify areas in which preventive awareness, responsible communication, cyber safety, and appropriate reporting mechanisms may be strengthened within the school community. Preventive education and stakeholder engagement have likewise been identified as important components of public safety initiatives addressing behavioral risks, particularly when programs seek to improve awareness, communication, and community participation (Bautista & Gaviola, 2026).

## Relationship Between Social Media Exposure and Deviant Behavior Influence

**Table 5**

*Significant Spearman Correlations Between Social Media Exposure and Deviant Behavior Influence*

| Social Media Exposure Variable | Deviant Behavior Influence Variable  | Spearman's rho | p-value | Decision on $H_0$ | Interpretation                    |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------|---------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Overall Social Media Exposure  | Overall Deviant Behavior Influence   | .194           | < .001  | Reject $H_0$      | Significant positive relationship |
| Overall Social Media Exposure  | Suggestive Substance Use             | .176           | .001    | Reject $H_0$      | Significant positive relationship |
| Overall Social Media Exposure  | Suggestive Sexual Messages and Poses | .213           | < .001  | Reject $H_0$      | Significant positive relationship |

*Note. Spearman's rho was used to determine the relationships between social media exposure and deviant behavior influence. The null hypothesis was rejected for relationships that were statistically significant at the .05 level.*

Table 5 presents the statistically significant relationships between social media exposure and deviant behavior influence among the respondents. The overall correlation between social media exposure and deviant behavior influence was positive and statistically significant ( $\rho = .194, p < .001$ ), leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. This indicates that respondents who reported higher levels of overall social media exposure also tended to report higher levels of deviant behavior influence.

The results further showed a statistically significant positive relationship between overall social media exposure and suggestive substance use ( $\rho = .176, p = .001$ ). Similarly, overall social media exposure was significantly and positively related to suggestive sexual messages and poses ( $\rho = .213, p < .001$ ). These findings indicate that higher levels of reported social media exposure were associated with higher levels of influence related to these selected indicators of deviant behavior. However, the statistically significant relationships should not be interpreted to mean that social media exposure directly causes substance use, sexually suggestive behavior, or other forms of deviant behavior.

The association involving the overall variables was positive but relatively small in magnitude. Likewise, the correlation coefficients involving suggestive substance use and suggestive sexual messages and poses indicate



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relatively weak associations. Thus, the findings should be interpreted as evidence of statistical relationships within the study sample rather than evidence of a direct causal pathway. Social media exposure alone cannot be considered the sole determinant of deviant behavior influence, as other individual, interpersonal, social, environmental, and contextual factors may also contribute to the outcomes examined in the study.

The significant associations may be interpreted in relation to the theoretical perspectives adopted in the study. Social Learning Theory provides a framework for understanding how repeated observation, interaction, and exposure may create opportunities for behavioral modeling. Routine Activity Theory and Cyber Lifestyle-Routine Activities Theory likewise provide perspectives for understanding how routine online activities may create opportunities for harmful interactions, risky encounters, and victimization (Bandura, 1977; Cohen & Felson, 1979; Vakhitova, 2025).

The relationship between social media exposure and suggestive substance use may also be considered from a criminological and preventive perspective. Exposure to behavioral content, social influences, and communication environments may create opportunities for individuals to encounter messages or influences associated with risky behaviors. However, preventive interventions addressing substance-related risks should recognize that behavioral outcomes are shaped by multiple interacting factors rather than by online exposure alone. Preventive education, effective communication, and stakeholder engagement have likewise been identified as important components of initiatives that seek to address behavioral risks and strengthen public safety awareness (Bautista & Gaviola, 2026).

Similarly, the significant relationship involving suggestive sexual messages and poses may be understood within the broader context of online interaction, exposure, behavioral modeling, and digital environments. Repeated exposure to particular forms of online content and interaction may provide opportunities for observation and behavioral modeling, although the present findings do not establish that such exposure directly produces sexually suggestive behavior. The interpretation should therefore remain consistent with the correlational nature of the study and recognize the possible influence of other personal, interpersonal, and environmental factors.

Taken together, the findings support the need for preventive approaches that promote responsible online behavior, cyber safety, and digital awareness without assuming that social media exposure alone determines behavioral outcomes. The results suggest the value of interventions that go beyond simply restricting social media use and instead emphasize informed decision-making, responsible digital citizenship, appropriate psychosocial support, and the development of protective coping strategies. Such approaches may help address potential behavioral risks while preserving the legitimate academic, informational, and interpersonal benefits of social media.

## Qualitative Findings: Challenges, Coping Mechanisms, and Insights

**Table 6**

*Qualitative Themes From the In-Depth Interviews*

| Major Theme            | Emergent Themes                                                           | Summary of Findings                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Challenges encountered | Negative comments; Hacked accounts; Negative effects                      | Participants described fake news, false information, criticism, bullying, privacy concerns, account compromise, and emotional or behavioral effects.                                                                   |
| Coping mechanisms      | Severing ties with negativity; Personal adjustments; Retaliatory behavior | Participants blocked, unfollowed, or limited contact with negative accounts, adjusted their social media use, and, in some instances, responded with similarly negative behavior before discontinuing the interaction. |
| Shared insights        | Responsible social media use; Benefits of social media                    | Participants emphasized thinking before posting, critically evaluating information, moderation, respectful communication, and the usefulness of social media for learning and communication.                           |

The qualitative findings provided context for the quantitative results by identifying the specific experiences through which social media exposure could become problematic.

### Theme 1: Negative Comments

Negative comments emerged as one of the challenges encountered by the participants. Students described experiences involving fake news, false information, criticism, bashing, and hateful messages. These findings suggest that the interaction dimension of social media exposure may also involve contact with unwanted or harmful interpersonal communication (Al-Turif & Al-Sanad, 2023).



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The qualitative findings therefore provide context for the quantitative results by demonstrating that high exposure does not refer solely to the amount or frequency of social media use. Exposure may also involve repeated encounters with interpersonal content that participants perceive as harmful or distressing.

## **Theme 2: Hacked Accounts**

Account compromise emerged as another challenge. Participants described unauthorized access to their accounts, loss of control over personal information, and concerns regarding inappropriate content being posted without their authorization.

These accounts demonstrate that social media use may involve risks associated with cybervictimization, privacy, and reputational harm (Marttila et al., 2021; Elmas, 2022). Although the present study did not measure the prevalence of cybercrime victimization beyond the participants' reported experiences, the findings indicate that account security and privacy awareness are relevant areas for preventive intervention.

## **Theme 3: Negative Effects**

Participants also described emotional and behavioral effects associated with their negative online experiences, including reduced confidence, pressure to compare themselves with others, and difficulty maintaining focus. Although these experiences occurred in a different context from formal rehabilitation or reintegration settings, criminological research likewise recognizes that emotional burden, social difficulties, and inadequate support may complicate individuals' efforts to manage adverse experiences and adjust their behavior. These accounts underscore the importance of accessible psychosocial support, supportive social relationships, and appropriate interventions when negative experiences are associated with emotional and behavioral difficulties. Evidence from rehabilitation settings further demonstrates that structured psychological interventions and supportive relationships may facilitate cognitive, emotional, and behavioral adjustment among individuals experiencing behavioral challenges (Lee, 2026; Tingal & Lugtu, 2026). These accounts provide additional context for understanding how students experience the social environment created through digital interaction (Al-Mamun et al., 2022; Shams et al., 2022; Kolhar et al., 2021).

The findings do not establish that social media alone caused these effects. Rather, they indicate that some participants associated their negative online experiences with perceived emotional and behavioral consequences.

## **Theme 4: Severing Ties With Negativity**

Participants described blocking, unfollowing, unfriending, deactivating accounts, or otherwise limiting contact with negative online content or users. These responses represented self-protective strategies intended to reduce further exposure to unwanted interactions.

From the perspective of Routine Activity Theory, these actions may be understood as efforts to reduce opportunities for continued harmful interaction or victimization (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Vakhitova, 2025).

## **Theme 5: Personal Adjustments**

Participants also described setting boundaries, limiting their time online, taking breaks, and deliberately selecting more positive content. These strategies reflected attempts to regulate their own social media use while continuing to recognize its value for communication and academic activities.

The findings demonstrate that the respondents did not describe social media as entirely harmful. Instead, their experiences reflected an effort to maintain its perceived benefits while managing problematic interactions.

## **Theme 6: Retaliatory Behavior**

Some participants reported responding to offensive or harmful online interactions with harsh or offensive language. In some instances, they later deleted posts or discontinued the interaction.

This finding is particularly relevant to criminology because it illustrates the possibility that negative online interactions may involve reciprocal or retaliatory responses. The qualitative evidence does not establish a general causal process, but it provides examples of how students who experience negative online interactions may, in some circumstances, respond by reproducing similar forms of behavior. This pattern may be interpreted in relation to social learning and peer influence perspectives (Bandura, 1977; Laursen & Veenstra, 2021; Jiang, 2023).

## **Theme 7: Responsible Social Media Use**

Participants emphasized responsible, moderate, and thoughtful social media use. Their insights included thinking before posting, evaluating information before believing or sharing it, considering the possible effects of online communication, and protecting personal privacy.



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These findings provide participant-based support for preventive approaches centered on responsible digital behavior rather than the complete restriction of social media use.

## Theme 8: Benefits of Social Media Use

Despite the challenges described, participants also recognized the usefulness of social media for communication, learning, information sharing, and personal development. This finding complements the quantitative result in which the academic dimension of social media exposure received the highest median rating (Andleeb et al., 2023; Kolhar et al., 2021; Rana et al., 2023).

The findings therefore support a balanced interpretation. Within this study, social media was described as an environment that may provide educational and interpersonal benefits while also presenting opportunities for exposure to harmful content and negative interactions.

## Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of the quantitative and qualitative findings provided a more comprehensive explanation of the results. Quantitatively, the respondents reported high levels of social media exposure and a statistically significant positive association between social media exposure and deviant behavior influence. Qualitatively, participants described negative comments, misinformation, account compromise, harmful content, peer conflict, and retaliatory responses as part of their social media experiences.

The qualitative findings help contextualize the quantitative association. They suggest that social media exposure may involve different types of experiences, ranging from academic communication and information sharing to harmful interpersonal interactions and cyber safety concerns.

The integrated findings do not establish that social media exposure causes deviant behavior. However, they provide localized evidence indicating that students' online experiences may include risk-related interactions that are relevant to cyber safety, crime prevention, and responsible digital behavior (Marttila et al., 2021; Laursen & Veenstra, 2021; Vakhitova, 2025).

## Proposed Program for Responsible Social Media Use

Based on the integrated findings, a school-based program for responsible social media use may be proposed. The proposed intervention recognizes that behavioral concerns may be more effectively addressed through structured, sustained, and supportive activities rather than through isolated awareness campaigns alone. Research in correctional and rehabilitation settings similarly highlights the value of structured interventions, stakeholder support, and sustained implementation in facilitating behavioral transformation and positive outcomes (Ditche, 2026). The proposed program is intended as an evidence-informed response to the issues identified in the study. Its effectiveness has not yet been tested; therefore, the program should be presented as a proposed intervention rather than as a demonstrated solution.

**Table 7**

*Proposed Program for Responsible Social Media Use, Cyber Safety, and Preventive Awareness*

| Component                               | Key Activities                                                                                        | Intended Outcome                                                                       |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Digital citizenship orientation         | Open forums or seminars on responsible social media use, respectful communication, and online conduct | Enhanced awareness of responsible online behavior                                      |
| Account security and privacy            | Activities on password security, privacy settings, account recovery, and reporting account compromise | Improved awareness of account security and privacy practices                           |
| Critical media and information literacy | Activities on evaluating sources, identifying misinformation, and responsible sharing                 | Strengthened critical evaluation of online information                                 |
| Cyberbullying prevention                | Discussions on harmful comments, retaliation, reporting, blocking, and available support mechanisms   | Increased awareness of constructive responses to harmful online interactions           |
| Cyberlaw awareness                      | Information sessions on relevant Philippine laws, including R.A. No. 10175 and R.A. No. 9995          | Improved awareness of selected legal and social consequences of harmful online conduct |



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The proposed program focuses on prevention, responsible digital citizenship, cyber safety, and awareness rather than restricting legitimate academic and social uses of social media. Its components were derived from the challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights identified in the quantitative and qualitative findings. The development of preventive programs may be strengthened through systematic planning, capacity building, appropriate supervision, adequate institutional support, human-centered approaches, and coordination among relevant stakeholders rather than relying solely on procedural or informational measures. These factors have been identified as important considerations in strengthening preventive, rehabilitative, and community-based interventions and in supporting the implementation of comprehensive action plans (Dasig, 2026; Gaviola et al., 2026).

## **Conclusions**

The study found that college students at Rizal Memorial Colleges, Inc. reported a high level of social media exposure, with the academic dimension obtaining the highest rating. This finding indicates that social media formed an important part of the respondents' reported activities related to learning, communication, and access to information. The respondents also reported a high level of deviant behavior influence across the dimensions measured in the study: suggestive substance use, cyberbullying, and suggestive sexual messages and poses. These findings should be interpreted according to the construct measured by the instrument and should not be understood as evidence that all respondents personally engaged in the identified behaviors.

A statistically significant positive association was found between overall social media exposure and deviant behavior influence ( $\rho = .194, p < .001$ ). The finding indicates an association within the study sample; however, the correlational component of the design does not establish that social media exposure causes deviant behavior influence.

The qualitative findings provided context for the statistical results. Participants described challenges involving negative comments, misinformation, account compromise, privacy concerns, and negative emotional or behavioral effects. Their coping responses included blocking or distancing themselves from negative accounts, making personal adjustments to their social media use, and, in some cases, responding to negative interactions through retaliatory behavior.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that social media served both beneficial and potentially problematic functions within the experiences of the participants. The results contribute localized evidence relevant to crime prevention, cyber safety, and public safety governance by identifying areas in which preventive awareness, responsible digital behavior, account security, cyberbullying prevention, and appropriate responses to harmful online interactions may be strengthened.

The findings provide the basis for a proposed program for responsible social media use, cyber safety, and preventive awareness. The effectiveness of the proposed program, however, remains to be evaluated through future implementation and assessment.

## **Recommendations**

**For Students.** Students may practice responsible and moderate social media use by critically evaluating information before sharing it, protecting their personal accounts and privacy, avoiding retaliatory responses to harmful online interactions, and using available blocking, reporting, or support mechanisms when appropriate (Mishna et al., 2022; Marttila et al., 2021).

**For the School Community.** The school community may strengthen guidance and awareness activities concerning respectful online communication, cyberbullying prevention, privacy protection, responsible sharing of information and images, and appropriate responses to harmful online behavior. Support and referral mechanisms for students experiencing harassment, account compromise, or other harmful online interactions may also be made more visible and accessible (Bartlett, 2023; Mishna et al., 2022).

**For School Administration.** The administration may consider implementing or adapting the proposed program on responsible social media use, cyber safety, and preventive awareness. The implementation may be strengthened through sustained institutional support, appropriate personnel involvement, coordination among relevant stakeholders, and periodic monitoring, as structured interventions may be affected by limitations in resources, implementation support, and stakeholder collaboration (Ditche, 2026). Activities may include digital citizenship orientation, account security and privacy awareness, critical evaluation of online information, cyberbullying prevention, and awareness of relevant Philippine cybercrime laws (Vakhitova, 2025; Al-Turif & Al-Sanad, 2023).

Because the proposed program has not yet been tested, its implementation may initially be evaluated through pilot implementation and appropriate outcome assessment before broader institutional adoption.

**For Criminal Justice, Law Enforcement, and Public Safety Stakeholders.** Relevant criminal justice, law enforcement, and public safety stakeholders may support age-appropriate awareness initiatives concerning cybercrime



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victimization, privacy breaches, online harassment, responsible digital conduct, and appropriate reporting mechanisms for harmful online behavior.

The findings of the present study may be useful as localized evidence for preventive education and public safety awareness initiatives involving young adults. However, the results should not be generalized beyond the study population without further evidence (Marttila et al., 2021; Cheng, 2023).

For Future Researchers. Future researchers may examine the specific factors associated with the relationship between social media exposure and deviant behavior influence, including peer influence, motivations for posting or sharing harmful content, cybervictimization experiences, and other individual or environmental factors. Studies may also involve other institutions and geographic locations and may use longitudinal or other mixed-methods approaches to examine changes over time (Jiang, 2023; Zheng et al., 2024; Weulen Kranenbarg et al., 2022).

Future studies may also evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed program before claims are made regarding its ability to reduce harmful online interactions, cybervictimization risks, or deviant behavior influence.

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