

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ORGANISED CRIME AND FAMILIAL ADJUSTMENT

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ABSTRACT:

The social media problem has emerged as a relevant domain of social media for digital crime exposure and family functioning, but these aspects have not yet been analyzed jointly within an empirical model. The relationships between problematic social media usage, exposure to organized criminal activity, cyber-enabled criminal activity, and familial adjustment were examined in the current study with the help of 320 respondents. A quantitative cross sectional design was used. Problematic social media use was evaluated using six indicators of problematic use, namely: excessive usage, preoccupation, withdrawal, and the use of social media to avoid situations that are normally social. Crime exposure was evaluated using eight indicators of suspicious or criminal internet use, and familial adjustment was evaluated using ten items that cover: communication, bonding, support, trust, conflict, shared time, role adjustment, and harmony. The relationships between the main variables were analysed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation, chi-square tests and multiple regression. Crime exposure ($r = .413, p < .001$) and familial adjustment ($r = -.543, p < .001$) were positively and negatively associated with problematic social-media use, respectively. The level of familial adjustment was also found to be negatively correlated with crime exposure ($r = -.334, p < .001$). The results of regression models confirmed that problematic social-media-use was a significant predictor of higher levels of crime exposure, whereas problem use and crime exposure were significant predictors of poor familial adjustment independently. The results suggest that there is a relationship between problematic digital engagement, increased vulnerability to harmful digital environments, and decreased family functioning at the same time. The strategies should, therefore, incorporate aspects of cyber-risk awareness, responsible use of social media, and the incorporation of communication support within the family.

KEYWORDS: Problematic social-media use; organised cybercrime; crime exposure; familial adjustment; cybercrime vulnerability; family functioning

INTRODUCTION

Social media is now so ingrained in daily communication, information sharing, entertainment, and relationships that it is now a way of life. It has been increasing in prevalence and providing new opportunities for interaction, and greater exposure to problematic digital environments. Problematic patterns of use, including compulsive checking, difficulty reducing usage, sleep disruption, and interference with daily activities, have emerged as important behavioural concerns, particularly among younger users (Shannon et al., 2022). Such patterns can co-occur with larger scale problematic smartphone use (PSU) and imply underlying issues with technology regulation which goes beyond the frequency of digital interactions (Marino et al., 2021). In addition to these psychosocial issues, social media platforms have become increasingly integral to the criminological interest due to the role it can play in the facilitation of communication, coordination, recruitment, fraud and other organised or cyber-enabled forms of criminal activity (Andrews et al., 2018).

The link between problematic social-media use and criminal exposure is particularly significant, as heavy and frequent use of social media can lead to higher exposure to suspicious accounts, fake offers, illegal content, misleading job postings, extortion attempts, and requests for personal, sensitive information. Previous studies have confirmed that adverse social media habits are correlated with increased risk of becoming a victim of cybercrime (Marttila et al., 2021), which suggests that online activities can impact the risk of falling victim of cybercrime. Organised crime has also become more networked, with criminal actors increasingly using flexible relationships and crime networks that are interdependent and cross over from traditional territorial boundaries (Clark et al., 2021). Social connections, access points and exposure to a network are similarly relevant to the recruitment into organised crime, such that the digitally mediated environments are relevant for understanding how individuals might be exposed to criminal opportunities (Calderoni et al., 2022). The concept of crime exposure in the current context, however, did not mean exposure to organised or cyber-enabled crime but rather exposure to indicators of organised or cyber-enabled crime.

These risks can occur in the real world as well. Familial adjustment is indicated by the communication, emotional connection, trust, quality of time, emotional support, conflict resolution, adjustment of roles and overall harmony in the family. Excessive use of social media has been linked to issues in family functioning, such as poor communication and interpersonal problems (Topino et al., 2023). A large number of studies have demonstrated that family functioning is significantly related to social media addiction among university students; this means that it is important to examine digital behavior in the broader family context (Qi et al., 2024). Another key determinant found to be associated with problematic social-media use and social connectedness is family-life satisfaction (Savci et al., 2022). The weaker parent-child relationship has been consistently linked to problematic internet usage in various cultures, at the relational level (Zhu et al., 2022). Family support also can be a significant protective resource. The international literature indicates that family dynamics, such as family conflict, are linked to increased risks of problem digital-media use among children and adolescents, and supportive family environments are linked to reduced vulnerability to problematic social-media use (Lahti et al., 2024; Wei et al., 2025). More recent findings further indicate that family support may shape the broader health consequences associated with problematic social-media engagement (Ledel et al., 2025). Despite these findings, research into social-media exposure and family adjustment has tended to focus on either problematic social-media use or social-media-related crime exposure with little available evidence on the interaction between these constructs and family functioning.

For this reason, the present research explored the patterns of social media use, exposure to organized or cyber-criminal activities, and familial adjustment, as well as the relationships among these factors while controlling for such factors as demographics and social media usage. The problematic social-media use was hypothesized to be positively related with crime exposure, negatively with familial adjustment and higher crime exposure to lower familial adjustment.

The objectives of the study are:

- To examine the relationship between problematic social-media use and exposure to organised or cyber-enabled criminal activities.
- To assess the association between problematic social-media use and familial adjustment among respondents.
- To determine whether exposure to organised or cyber-enabled criminal activities is significantly associated with familial adjustment after accounting for relevant demographic and social-media-use characteristics.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design and Participants

The quantitative cross-sectional design was used to explore the relationship between social-media behaviour, experiences of exposure to organised or cyber-enabled crime and familial adjustment. A total of 320 respondents with complete records made up the analytical sample. The participants included individuals from various age groups, genders, marital status, education, occupation, residential status and family type. The features enabled the study to take account of variation in digital behaviour and family situation. Final analytical sample included only complete respondent records that had the variables needed for the analyses planned.

2.2 Measures and Variable Operationalisation

Three main constructs were examined. The problematic social media use was assessed using 6 items that included compulsive checking, difficulties with reducing social media use, neglecting tasks, sleep disturbance, irritability, and interference with daily life. Crime exposure was defined according to eight items concerning suspicious accounts, fraudulent schemes, illegal content, recruitment, threats, scams, coordinated criminal promotion and requests for sensitive information. The familial adjustment was assessed via ten questions that examined communication, bonding, conflict, support, trust, time spent together, role adjustment and harmony. The family items were reverse scored prior to the composite items.

2.3 Data Handling and Ethical Considerations

All the information gathered from respondents was processed in anonymised form, and there were no explicit personal data in the analytical records. Prior to analysis, the data was checked for a complete response, consistent coding, and appropriate comparability of responses among the study variables. The information relating to participation was handled confidentially during the analytical process. Only the above stated research goals were evaluated in the responses and it has not been attempted to identify individual participants. Duplicate responses, missing responses, and values outside the specified response limits were also checked for in the records.

2.4 Reliability, Data Screening and Statistical Analysis

Data screening was performed before hypothesis testing. The percent of missing values, duplicate records, coding consistency and ranges of responses were examined for all variables. Cronbach's alpha was used to determine the internal consistency of the three multi-item measures. Categorical variables were summarised using frequencies and percentages, while continuous variables were summarised using means and standard deviations. The relationships between the main constructs were examined using Pearson correlation.

Associations between categorical levels were evaluated using chi-square tests and adjusted associations using multiple regression models. A 5% level of significance was used for evaluation of the statistical significance.

2.5 Analytical Model

The analytical model investigated three main relationships that were the outcome of the objectives of the study. First, problematic social-media use was evaluated with regard to exposure to organised and cyber-enabled criminal activities. Second, the question of problematic social-media use as a predictor of familial adjustment was explored. Thirdly, we measured crime exposure as a function of familial adjustment with control for social-media behaviour. Control variables were included as appropriate, including relevant demographic and social characteristics of use of social media. This design provided an integrated framework for exploring the connections between digital behaviour, crime exposure and family functioning.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Respondent Profile and Patterns of Social-Media Use

The sample comprised 320 respondents aged 18–69 years ($M = 33.45$, $SD = 13.09$). The females accounted for 50.0% of the participants, and males accounted for 47.5%. The majority of the respondents were unmarried (63.8%), urban residents (47.8%) and nuclear family members (62.2%). The majority of people had an undergraduate degree qualification, and the highest percentage of employed people came from the private sector. The mean number of social media platforms used was 3.77 and the mean time spent per day using social media was 3.56 hours. The top platform was WhatsApp, followed by Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. The use of night time was also distributed across the five-point response scale. Table 1 summarises the demographic profile of the respondents together with their main patterns of social-media use.

Table 1. Respondent Profile and Social-Media Use Characteristics

Characteristic	Category/Statistic	n / Value	%
Sample size	Total respondents	320	100.0
Age	Mean $\pm$ SD	33.45 $\pm$ 13.09 years	—
Age	Range	18–69 years	—
Gender	Female	160	50.0
	Male	152	47.5
	Other/Prefer not to say	8	2.5
Marital status	Unmarried	204	63.8
	Married	104	32.5
	Divorced/Separated	7	2.2
	Widowed	5	1.6
Residence	Urban	153	47.8
	Semi-urban	89	27.8
	Rural	78	24.4
Family type	Nuclear family	199	62.2
Daily social-media use	Mean $\pm$ SD	3.56 $\pm$ 1.54 hours	—
Platforms used	Mean	3.77 platforms	—
Primary platforms	Most commonly reported	WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube	—

3.2 Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of the Main Constructs

The mean score for problematic social media-use was 3.02 ($SD = 0.73$); 53.1% of all the respondents were at the level of moderate use, 23.4% low use, and 23.4% high use. The mean organised/cyber-enabled crime exposure was 2.86 ($SD = 0.69$) and 63.4% experienced moderate exposure. The mean of the familial adjustment was 3.15 ($SD = 0.58$) while 71.3% of the subjects were in the moderate range. The internal consistency for problematic social-media use, crime exposure and familial adjustment were satisfactory ($\alpha = .810$, $\alpha = .800$, $\alpha = .809$, respectively). The scores obtained from these items were used in subsequent inferences. Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics, category distributions, and internal consistency of the three main constructs of this study.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistency of the Main Constructs

Construct	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α	Low, n (%)	Moderate, n (%)	High, n (%)
Problematic social-media use	3.02	0.73	.810	75 (23.4)	170 (53.1)	75 (23.4)
Organised/cyber-enabled crime exposure	2.86	0.69	.800	78 (24.4)	203 (63.4)	39 (12.2)
Familial adjustment	3.15	0.58	.809	26 (8.1)	228 (71.3)	66 (20.6)

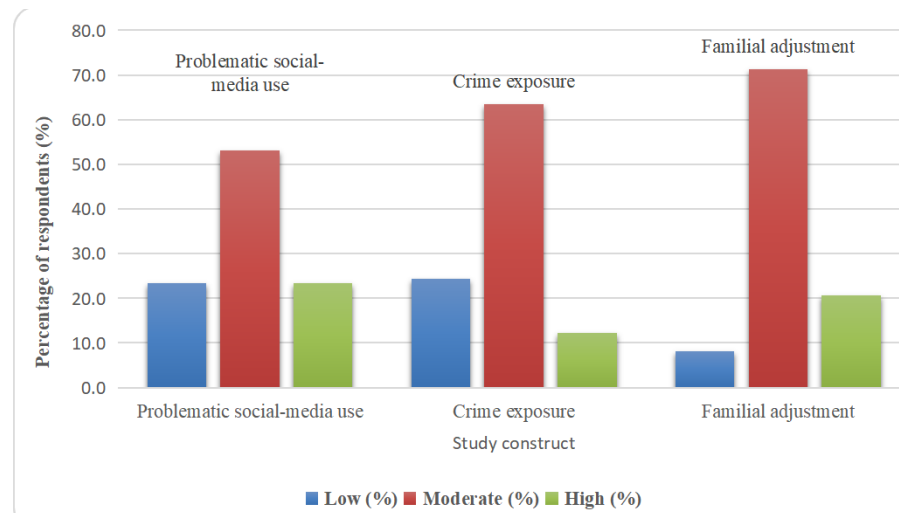


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents across low, moderate, and high levels of problematic social-media use, organised/cyber-enabled crime exposure, and familial adjustment.

3.3 Relationships among Social-Media Use, Crime Exposure and Familial Adjustment

Correlation analysis showed that problematic social-media use was positively associated with organised/cyber-enabled crime exposure ($r = .413$, $p < .001$) and negatively associated with familial adjustment ($r = -.543$, $p < .001$). A negative relation between familial adjustment ($r = -.334$, $p < .001$) and crime exposure was also observed. The days spent on social media per day was positively associated with problematic use ($r = .689$, $p < .001$) and crime exposure ($r = .477$, $p < .001$) and negatively associated with familial adjustment ($r = -.424$, $p < .001$). All three hypotheses were thus confirmed. Table 3 shows the direction and strength of the correlations among daily social-media use, problematic social-media use, crime exposure, and familial adjustment.

Table 3. Correlations among Social-Media Use, Crime Exposure, and Familial Adjustment

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Daily social-media hours	1			
2. Problematic social-media use	.689***	1		
3. Crime exposure	.477***	.413***	1	
4. Familial adjustment	-.424***	-.543***	-.334***	1

Note. *** $p < .001$. Crime exposure represents exposure to organised or cyber-enabled criminal indicators.

3.4 Multivariable Predictors of Crime Exposure and Familial Adjustment

Problems with social media use remained a strong positive predictor of crime exposure after the factor of age, gender, marital status, place of residence, and family type were considered ($B = 0.130$, $p = .047$), as was the number of hours spent on social media each day ($B = 0.190$, $p < .001$). The model accounted for 26.8% of the variance in the exposure to crime. The familial-adjustment model showed problematic social-media use ($B = -0.400$, $p < .001$) and crime exposure ($B = -0.104$, $p = .016$) as the significant negative predictors, and explained 33.5% of the variance. Adjusted regression estimates of the predictors of exposure to organised/cyber crime and familial adjustment are reported in Table 4.

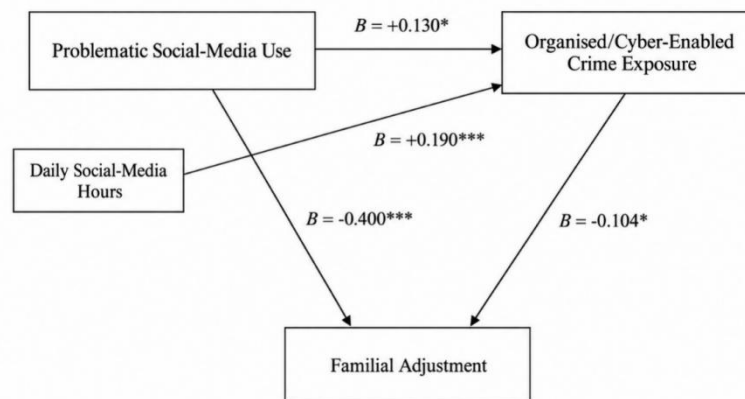
Table 4. Adjusted Regression Models Predicting Crime Exposure and Familial Adjustment

Model 1: Organised/Cyber-Enabled Crime Exposure

Predictor	B	p
Problematic social-media use	0.130	.047
Daily social-media hours	0.190	< .001
Model R ²	.268	—

Model 2: Familial Adjustment

Predictor	B	p
Problematic social-media use	-0.400	< .001
Crime exposure	-0.104	.016
Model R ²	.335	—



* $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$

Figure 2. Adjusted relationships among problematic social-media use, daily social-media hours, organised/cyber-enabled crime exposure, and familial adjustment.

Note. Models were adjusted for age, gender, marital status, residence, and family type. * $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$.

3.5 Group Differences and Robustness Analysis

The results of the continuous-variable data were supported by categorical comparisons. The level of problematic social media use was significantly correlated with crime-exposure level ($\chi^2 = 45.14$, $p < .001$), and familial-adjustment level ($\chi^2 = 54.15$, $p < .001$). Familial adjustment was also related to crime-exposure level ($\chi^2 = 24.03$, $p < .001$). In the high use group, 28 (out of 75) had high familial adjustment while 2 (out of 75) did so in the low use group. When the two family items that were directly related to social media were excluded, the negative relationships with problematic use ($r = -.472$) and crime exposure ($r = -.312$) remained. Table 5 outlines the categorical associations, significant group differences and robustness findings for problematic social-media use, crime exposure and familial adjustment.

Table 5. Group-Level Associations and Robustness Analysis

Panel A. Associations between categorical levels

Association tested	χ^2	p	Interpretation
Problematic social-media use $\times$ Crime exposure	45.14	< .001	Significant
Problematic social-media use $\times$ Familial adjustment	54.15	< .001	Significant
Crime exposure $\times$ Familial adjustment	24.03	< .001	Significant

Panel B. Key group comparison

Problematic social-media-use group	High familial adjustment, n	Total n	% with high familial adjustment
Low PSM use	28	75	37.3
High PSM use	2	75	2.7

Panel C. Robustness analysis

Relationship after excluding FA6 and FA9	r	Direction
Problematic social-media use $\times$ revised familial adjustment	-.472	Negative
Crime exposure $\times$ revised familial adjustment	-.312	Negative

4. DISCUSSION

The findings indicated a consistent relationship among problematic social-media use, exposure to organised or cyber-enabled criminal activity, and familial adjustment. Respondents with higher levels of problematic social-media use reported greater exposure to suspicious accounts, fraudulent schemes, recruitment attempts, cyberfraud, threatening content, and requests for sensitive information. This pattern confirmed the first hypothesis and indicated that exposure to social media platforms in an intensive or poorly-controlled manner could raise exposure to risky digital environments. Research on online fraud also has revealed that fraudsters often exploit trust, familiarity, and interpersonal interactions to build fraudulent relationships with the potential victim (Coluccia et al., 2020). Exposure to a threat, however, does not necessarily indicate victimisation as it is also dependent on judgment, prior experiences and ability to pick up on deceptive cues (Shang et al., 2023).

A routine activity perspective also was supported by the positive relationship between crime exposure and daily exposure to social media. When protective behaviours are low, the time spent online could lead to more opportunities for interaction with suspicious actors or harmful content. Digital guardianship, awareness, and detection of fraud are important factors to consider in understanding how to lower the risk of online victimisation (Parti, 2023). The current results thus indicated that problematic use could not only be an overuse of engagement but also an overall pattern of digital vulnerability. The interpretation is crucial as frauds online can have repercussions that are not just monetary, but also emotional, trust-building, and interpersonal (Drew & Webster, 2024).

A second key finding was the negative correlation between problematic social-media use and familial adjustment that was particularly strong. Those who reported a high score on compulsive use, sleep disruption, task neglect and inability to decrease use also reported problems with communication, support, trust, shared time, and overall family harmony. Comparable findings have been found regarding problematic internet use and lower family functioning and psychological issues for young adults (Marzilli et al., 2020). Another level of family processes can occur on an emotional level, like loneliness and inability to acknowledge or express emotions, which can reinforce problematic digital habits (Zhao et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the functioning of the family can affect the regulation of thoughts and behaviors related to a smartphone, implying that this relationship is bi-directional, and not one-directional (Xie et al., 2022).

Being exposed to crime continued to be a strong negative predictor of familial adjustment, even when controlling for problematic social-media use and demographic characteristics. This indicated that exposure to crime online added to the strain of excessive use of online platforms. There may be some positive effects of family support since the presence of family support may decrease the likelihood of encountering problematic internet use and emotional problems related to this use (Doğrusever & Bilgin, 2025). The results therefore supported an integrated interpretation in which digital behaviour, criminal exposure, and family functioning were interconnected rather than isolated domains.

Practically, the results were in favour of preventive approaches focusing on digital literacy and risk awareness. The awareness of social media threats and the promotion of safer online behaviour can be enhanced through adaptive cybersecurity education (Ben Salamah et al., 2023), and more general cybersecurity education can foster the ability to identify suspicious online activities (Jerman Blažič & Jerman Blažič, 2022). There are indications too that cyber-awareness initiatives which are tailored to the student population can help to increase awareness of phishing and social media scams (Mouncey & Ciobotaru, 2025). It is also important to encourage reporting of behaviour as the recognition of victimisation may impact on whether fraud is formally reported (Maher & Engle, 2024).

Results must be considered in light of the limitations of a cross sectional, self-reported study design, however. The analyses found associations but were not able to determine cause and effect. The crime measure did not measure actual involvement in organised crime and instead detected exposure to indicators of organised crime or cyber-enabled crime. Research in the future should thus employ longitudinal and multi-site designs with mixed methods to explore the changes in the development of digital exposure levels, family relations, victimisation and reporting behaviour over time.

5. CONCLUSION

Social media problem, exposure to organised and cyber-enabled criminal activity and familial adjustment were strongly interrelated in the analyzed sample. There was a positive correlation between problematic social-media use and exposure to suspicious accounts, fraudulent schemes, recruitment attempts, cyberfraud, threatening content, and requests for information. Concurrently, higher problematic use was associated with lower family communication, trust, support, shared time and family harmony. Another interesting finding was that familial adjustment was also found to be negatively associated with crime, which suggests that criminal exposure is not limited to online experiences but may also impact other aspects of family functioning. These findings underscore not only the significance of considering social-media behaviour in terms of screen time, but also as a potential pathway to cyber-enabled criminal vulnerability and relational strain. Preventive efforts should therefore combine digital literacy, fraud awareness, privacy protection, responsible platform use, and family-based communication strategies. The results must be considered with caution as a cross sectional and self-reported design did not allow for conclusions with respect to causal direction and the crime measure covered exposure rather than participation in organised crime. A longitudinal and multi-site study is recommended to further investigate changes in problematic use, criminal exposure, victimisation, reporting patterns and family relationships over time.

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