https://doi.org/10.54481/uekbs2025.59 CZU:159.922.8

DIGITAL TRIGGER: EXPOSURE TO HARMFUL CONTENT AND SUICIDAL RISK AMONG ADOLESCENTS

Oxana ISAC
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1781-0566
Moldova State University, Chișinău

Abstract

The exposure of adolescents to harmful digital content, particularly on social media platforms, represents a major concern for contemporary mental health. Adolescence is a vulnerable stage of emotional development, and the online environment can amplify risks through recommendation algorithms, lack of content filtering, and the indirect promotion of self-harm or suicidal discourse. This article analyzes the mechanisms through which such content acts as a psychological "digital trigger" for young people predisposed to emotional fragility, drawing on recent research, international statistics, and documented case studies. The correlation between excessive consumption of harmful materials and the emergence of depressive symptoms, body image distortions, and suicidal risk is highlighted. The paper also

discusses the social and cultural implications of the phenomenon, emphasizing the role of virtual communities in reinforcing dysfunctional behaviors. Furthermore, it proposes prevention and early intervention measures such as digital education, platform accountability, and collaboration among experts in psychology, sociology, and information technology.

Keywords: adolescent suicide, digital trigger, social media, mental health, harmful content, prevention, digital algorithms, vulnerable adolescents

Digitalization has revolutionized communication and access to information, but it has also introduced significant risks, particularly for adolescents. At a stage marked by identity formation and emotional immaturity, young people are exposed to a continuous flow of content—often unfiltered and potentially harmful. The concept of the digital trigger refers to those online stimuli capable of provoking intense psychological reactions, including the exacerbation of depressive and suicidal symptoms. This exposure has become a major risk factor for youth mental health, and analyzing its dynamics is essential for developing effective protection policies (Andrei).

Adolescence is a defining period for psychological and social development, characterized by identity-seeking, the need for belonging, and heightened sensitivity to external pressures. Within this context, emotional vulnerability renders exposure to harmful online content particularly impactful. Studies indicate that adolescents spend between 5 and 9 hours online daily, often encountering messages that may induce depression, anxiety, self-harm, or suicidal ideation (Balt).

This situation is further aggravated by the fact that adolescents often lack the cognitive and emotional tools necessary to filter or correctly interpret incoming information, increasing the likelihood of internalizing negative messages. Moreover, the need for social validation makes youth more prone to seeking and consuming content that reflects or normalizes emotional suffering and self-destructive behaviors. This tendency can be explained through social identification theory, which posits that adolescents adopt behavioral models from groups they identify with—thus, harmful content becomes even more influential (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

Harmful digital content functions as a trigger through a complex array of psychological mechanisms. Identification with presented victims, internalization of others' pain, and social pressure exerted through comments or reactions can induce and intensify depressive states and suicidal thoughts (Gould). These mechanisms are supported by neuropsychological theories of emotional regulation and adolescent brain development, in which the prefrontal cortex—responsible for decision-making and self-control—is not yet fully mature, thereby increasing susceptibility to external influences.

The phenomenon known as copycat suicide, documented since the 18th century, has been extensively studied in the context of the contemporary digital environment. The term refers to situations where an individual commits suicide after learning—directly or via the media—about another person's suicide, often imitating the method, context, or circumstances. Intense media exposure of a suicide case—particularly those involving celebrities or sensationalized narratives—creates behavioral models that vulnerable individuals may emulate. Factors such as age, gender, suicide method, and the victim's life context influence imitation: studies reveal that individuals who replicate such acts typically belong to the same demographic group as the original victim (Royal Society for Public Health). Detailed descriptions of self-harm or suicide methods can thus lead vulnerable adolescents to reproduce these behaviors. For instance, a young person engaging with online videos or forums dedicated to such topics may come to normalize these acts, interpreting them as viable solutions to emotional distress. Recent studies suggest that repeated exposure to suicidal content significantly increases the likelihood of behavioral imitation and self-harm, even among adolescents who initially exhibited no severe depressive symptoms.

Furthermore, the algorithms of social media platforms—designed to maximize user engagement—amplify the trigger effect by recommending content similar to what has been previously consumed. This creates a closed, toxic cycle of negative feedback, isolating adolescents and reinforcing maladaptive beliefs, thereby heightening suicidal risk.

An information loop describes a digital environment in which individuals are primarily exposed to information, opinions, or content that confirms their pre-existing beliefs or emotions. Within such loops, alternative or contradictory perspectives are rare or absent, leading to polarization, reinforcement of biases, and behavioral influence. Social media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram use algorithms that learn user preferences and provide more of the same type of content. This generates a reinforcement cycle: the more a user consumes a specific kind of material, the more the system supplies. Through sharing, likes, and reposts, content within these loops spreads rapidly, creating an echo chamber—a digital space where the same

ideas and emotions are mirrored and amplified, while exposure to neutral or positive information is diminished (WHO 2021).

For example, online groups in which young people discuss suicide or self-harm can evolve into such information loops. Repetitive messages and detailed descriptions of suicide methods intensify the risk of copycat suicide, particularly among vulnerable adolescents. The term itself originated after the publication of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel The Sorrows of Young Werther (1774), which reportedly inspired numerous young Europeans to imitate the protagonist's suicide.

Copycat suicide operates through social learning and behavioral imitation: when a vulnerable individual identifies with someone who has taken their own life (in terms of age, gender, or emotional context), the risk of replication increases. Suicide becomes perceived as a legitimate or even romanticized solution to comparable struggles, particularly when depicted heroically or aesthetically. Key risk factors include depression, social isolation, substance use, trauma, and repeated exposure to suicidal content.

In the social media era, copycat suicide has acquired a new dimension—known as digital contagion. Exposure to suicide-related materials (videos, farewell messages, live streams) can influence the behaviors of other users. Anonymous forums or closed groups can evolve into environments where suicide is normalized or even encouraged.

Social media platforms are designed to capture and retain user attention for as long as possible, generating a continuous flow of algorithmically recommended content. This system does not distinguish between beneficial and harmful materials, exposing adolescents to posts that may include images or messages depicting self-harm, suicide, or depression in romanticized or idealized forms. Phenomena such as glamour suicide and death chic contribute to the trivialization and aestheticization of suffering, reinforcing the emotional vulnerability of adolescents. These terms describe how death-related imagery and discourse are presented through appealing aesthetics - often accompanied by poetic, melancholic, or artistically inspired messages. For instance, stylized photographs featuring pills, tears, razor blades, or blood set in visually "beautiful" contexts; quotes about death w ritten in elegant fonts or placed against aesthetic backgrounds; melancholic video edits with pastel or monochrome filtersall evoke the idea of a "romantic" disappearance. Such representations extend into fashion trends inspired by death, hospitals, or mental illness.

On platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Tumblr, or Pinterest, this phenomenon manifests through hashtags such as #sadgirl, #suicideaesthetic, #deadinside, #angelcore, #depressedbeauty, and through memes or video edits that transform emotional suffering into artistic content. Influencers sometimes construct their personas around themes of depression and fragility, blurring the boundary between authentic self-expression and self-promotion. Viral music and melancholic soundtracks further romanticize death as an escape or aesthetic experience.

Reports by international organizations emphasize that social media algorithms exacerbate the echo chamber phenomenon by repeatedly exposing vulnerable adolescents to negative messages, thereby amplifying adverse emotional states (Van der Molen et al.). At the same time, research highlights that motivations for social media use play a decisive role: adolescents who engage with platforms primarily for emotional validation or escapism are at a higher risk of developing suicidal thoughts.

Empirical studies further demonstrate that the type of content consumed and the motivation behind use are more predictive of suicidal risk than the mere amount of time spent online. Passive, unstructured engagement increases exposure to harmful messages, whereas active, educational, or socially constructive use tends to mitigate these risks. Additionally, negative interactions—such as cyberbullying and trolling—exacerbate depressive symptoms and feelings of isolation.

According to data from the World Health Organization (WHO), suicide is the third leading cause of death among individuals aged 15–19, with global trends indicating a steady increase (Ibidem). The emblematic case of Molly Russell, a British teenager, drew worldwide attention and prompted social media platforms to reconsider their content moderation policies. Molly had been exposed for months to depressive and suicidal materials on Instagram, exposure that contributed to her tragic decision to end her life (Moreno et al. 2021.

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (2023) found that adolescent girls who spend more than three hours daily on social media are significantly more likely to report suicidal thoughts and attempts compared to those who use these platforms less frequently. In the Netherlands, an analysis of 35 cases of adolescent suicide revealed direct links to excessive social media use, cyberbullying, and exposure to dangerous content. Many of these young people were found to be "trapped" within digital echo chambers that amplified their emotional vulnerability and despair.

These findings underscore a clear relationship between the algorithmic reinforcement of harmful content, psychological fragility, and suicidal behaviors among youth populations. The correlation suggests that

suicide prevention efforts must extend beyond traditional mental health interventions to encompass digital behavioral monitoring, content regulation, and algorithmic transparency.

Given the escalating risks associated with adolescents' exposure to harmful digital content, developing prevention and intervention strategies has become a vital priority for safeguarding youth mental and emotional health. While the online environment provides numerous opportunities for learning and socialization, it also generates profound vulnerabilities when left unregulated.

Behaviors such as self-harm, social isolation, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideation can be triggered by harmful content and by algorithms that amplify such exposure. Prevention should not be perceived solely as a reactive measure, but rather as an educational, social, and technological process aimed at fostering resilience and critical thinking. Early intervention is equally crucial for mitigating the psychological impact of negative online experiences and for supporting adolescents in building a healthy digital relationship:

1. Digital Education and Media Literacy

A key pillar in combating digital risks is the promotion of digital literacy, which aims to develop critical thinking and equip adolescents with the tools to recognize and protect themselves from harmful content. This includes understanding mechanisms of emotional manipulation, recognizing digital triggers, and managing the affective responses elicited by online stimuli. Schools and educational systems should integrate structured curricula on digital citizenship, online ethics, and mental health awareness, helping adolescents discern between authentic expression and harmful exposure.

2. Algorithmic Regulation and Ethical Artificial Intelligence

Current digital service regulations must ensure greater transparency and accountability in how platforms' algorithms function. The Digital Services Act (DSA), recently adopted by the European Union, represents a significant step in this direction, aiming to limit the dissemination of harmful content and to promote effective alert and blocking systems for dangerous materials. Platforms should implement automated detection systems for content promoting self-harm and suicide, while providing users with clear options for reporting and obtaining support. Parallel to this, the development of ethical and responsible artificial intelligence can help prevent the unintentional amplification of harmful content.

3. Psychological Support in Schools

Schools should become safe environments for the early detection of emotional distress and suicidal risk. Implementing mental health programs with trained and accessible counselors, as well as educational sessions for students and teachers, represents a crucial intervention. Such programs should include stress management techniques, resilience-building, and awareness of online risks. Collaboration with parents and communities is also necessary to create an integrated support system that combines psychological, educational, and social resources.

4. Family Involvement

The family plays a central role in preventing the negative effects of digital exposure on adolescents. Parents should be informed and trained to recognize warning signs of emotional distress, understand the digital language of youth, and maintain open dialogue about their online experiences. Setting clear boundaries regarding screen time, monitoring the type of accessed content, and fostering a stable, supportive emotional environment can significantly reduce exposure to harmful materials. Families should also encourage healthy self-esteem and offline social interaction.

5. Intersectoral Collaboration

The issue of digital triggers and adolescent suicidal risk requires a systemic and collaborative approach. Governments, public health institutions, educational systems, non-governmental organizations, and digital platforms must coordinate efforts to develop effective public policies and integrated prevention programs. This collaboration should include continuous monitoring, research support, and rapid implementation of effective measures. Transparency and the exchange of best practices at an international level are essential for adapting strategies to an ever-changing digital landscape.

6. Digital Support and Intervention Platforms

Beyond prevention, it is vital to ensure easy access to online psychological support services—anonymous, non-judgmental, and available 24/7. Platforms such as Headspace, SafeSpace, or specialized chat and helpline counseling services can provide immediate assistance to adolescents in crisis. These services should be actively promoted among youth and integrated within educational and healthcare systems. Moreover, professionals working in such programs must receive specialized training to address the specific psychological needs arising from the digital environment.

Although the digital environment brings significant benefits to adolescents' lives, it can also represent a major risk factor for their mental health when unmanaged properly. Exposure to harmful content—intensified

by algorithmic amplification and insufficient protective measures—can activate digital triggers that substantially increase suicidal risk. A multidisciplinary approach is therefore essential, encompassing digital education, strict platform regulation, accessible psychological support, and the active involvement of families and communities. Only through collective, well-coordinated efforts can we create a digital environment that is safe, responsible, and conducive to the healthy development of adolescents.

Bibliographical References

Andrei, Mirela. *Adolescenții și capcanele digitalului*. București: Editura Trei, 2020.

Balt, Elias et al. „Social media use of adolescents who died by suicide: lessons from a psychological autopsy study." *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, vol. 17, Art. 48, 2023.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Youth Risk Behavior Survey*, 2023.

Gould, Madelyn S., et al. „The Werther effect and suicide contagion: A systematic review." *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, vol. 66, no. 7, 2012, pp. 630-637.

Royal Society for Public Health. „#StatusOfMind: Social media and young people's mental health and wellbeing." 2017.

World Health Organization. „Adolescent mental health." 2021. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health

Van der Molen, Anouk, et al. „Social media use and suicide risk: A psychological autopsy study in the Netherlands." *Journal of Affective Disorders*, vol. 280, 2021, pp. 375-383.

Weare, Katherine. „Promoting mental, emotional and social health: a whole school approach." *Health Education*, 2015.

Moreno, Megan A., et al. „Parents' role in adolescent digital media use." *Pediatrics*, 2021.