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Article

Legal and Psychological Analysis of Juvenile Criminal Responsibility in Cyberspace

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Simple Summary

This study was proposed because many adolescents are involved in crimes online, but current laws often do not consider their psychological development. The authors aim to explore how legal rules and psychological factors together affect the responsibility of young people for their actions in cyberspace. By combining legal review and psychological tests, the research seeks to better understand when and how adolescents should be held accountable for cyber offenses. The findings can help improve legal decisions and create fairer policies that consider the mental and emotional maturity of youth. This approach may lead to more effective prevention and rehabilitation programs, benefiting both the justice system and society by addressing juvenile cybercrime more appropriately.

Abstract

The increasing engagement of adolescents in virtual environments has raised critical concerns regarding their criminal liability in cyberspace. Despite the growing prevalence of juvenile offenses online, there is a significant gap in integrating legal frameworks with psychological insights to comprehensively address this issue. This study aims to analyze the criminal responsibility of adolescents in cyberspace through a multidisciplinary lens combining legal analysis and psychological evaluation. Employing a mixed-methods approach, qualitative legal analysis was conducted alongside quantitative psychological assessments of adolescent cognitive and moral development, using validated scales and statistical tests including chi-square and logistic regression to examine correlations between psychological maturity and legal accountability. Results reveal that traditional legal criteria for criminal responsibility often overlook the nuanced psychological development stages of adolescents, leading to potential misjudgments in cyberspace-related offenses. The findings underscore the necessity of adapting legal standards to incorporate psychological maturity, promoting fairer judicial outcomes. This research contributes novel insights by proposing an integrated legal-psychological model for assessing juvenile cybercriminal liability, emphasizing the importance of developmental psychology in legal adjudication. The study advocates for policy reforms and tailored intervention programs that reflect adolescents' cognitive and emotional capacities in virtual crime contexts. Ultimately, this work advances the understanding of juvenile justice in the digital era, offering a foundation for more effective, just, and rehabilitative approaches to adolescent cyber offenses.

Keywords: juvenile criminal responsibility; cybercrime; adolescent psychology; legal analysis; cognitive development

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The rapid expansion of digital technologies and the widespread use of the internet among adolescents have transformed the nature of juvenile delinquency. Increasingly, young people engage in various forms of cyber offenses, ranging from hacking and cyberbullying to online fraud and digital harassment. This shift presents new challenges for legal systems worldwide, as traditional frameworks often fail to adequately address the unique characteristics of cybercrime committed by juveniles. Recent large-scale studies, such as the CC-DRIVER 2021 European Youth Survey, highlight that factors influencing juvenile cybercrime are multifaceted, involving demographic, technological, and psychosocial variables. Moreover, psychological development during adolescence, including cognitive and moral maturity, critically affects juveniles' capacity to understand and control their actions in virtual environments[1,2]. These complexities necessitate an integrated approach combining legal and psychological perspectives to evaluate juvenile criminal responsibility in cyberspace effectively.

1.2. Problem Statement

Despite the growing prevalence of juvenile cyber offenses, there is a lack of harmonization between cyber laws and juvenile justice systems. Current legislation often applies adult standards of criminal responsibility to adolescents without sufficiently considering their developmental stage and psychological capacity. This mismatch can lead to unjust legal outcomes and ineffective rehabilitation strategies. Furthermore, the rapid evolution of digital platforms complicates the identification and prosecution of juvenile offenders, raising questions about how responsibility should be assigned in cyberspace.

1.3. Significance and Necessity of the Research

Addressing juvenile cybercrime requires a nuanced understanding of both legal principles and adolescent psychology. This research is essential to bridge the gap between these disciplines, providing a framework that can inform policymakers, legal practitioners, and mental health professionals. By integrating psychological assessments of maturity with legal criteria, the study aims to enhance the fairness and effectiveness of juvenile justice in the digital age. Such advancements can improve rehabilitation efforts, reduce recidivism, and protect the rights of young offenders while maintaining public safety.

1.4. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Recent research underscores the importance of developmental psychology in assessing criminal responsibility among juveniles. Wissink et al. (2023) conducted a meta-analytic review demonstrating significant associations between psychological risk factors and juvenile cyber offending. Similarly, Weulen Kranenbarg et al. (2022) employed longitudinal social network analysis to reveal how peer influence and ICT skills contribute to cyber-delinquency. Legal analyses, such as those by Indian scholars[3], emphasize the need for reform in juvenile cyber laws to align with international standards and child protection principles. The theoretical framework of this study synthesizes these perspectives, applying a multidisciplinary lens that combines legal doctrines with empirical psychological findings to assess juvenile responsibility in cyberspace.

1.5. Research Objectives and Questions

1.5.1. This Study Aims to:

- Analyze the current legal frameworks governing juvenile criminal responsibility in cyber offenses.
- Examine psychological factors influencing adolescents' capacity for criminal intent and control in cyberspace.

- Propose an integrated model for assessing juvenile liability that incorporates developmental psychology.

1.5.2. Research Questions Include:

- How do existing laws address juvenile cybercrime, and what are their limitations?
- What psychological characteristics affect adolescents’ criminal responsibility in virtual environments?
- How can legal and psychological criteria be combined to improve juvenile justice outcomes in cybercrime cases?

2. Theoretical Foundations and Literature Review

2.1. Key Theories and Fundamental Concepts

The concept of juvenile criminal responsibility in cyberspace intersects legal doctrines with developmental psychology. Legally, responsibility is often tied to the age of criminal liability and capacity to form intent (mens rea). However, psychological theories of adolescent development emphasize that cognitive, moral, and emotional maturity evolve progressively during adolescence, affecting decision-making and impulse control[1]. Theories such as Kohlberg’s stages of moral development and Miller et al. dual-systems model highlight that adolescents’ risk assessment and self-regulation differ significantly from adults, which is critical in evaluating their accountability for cyber offenses. Moreover, cybercrime introduces unique challenges, including anonymity and detachment from physical consequences, which can diminish adolescents’ perception of harm and legal boundaries[4–6].

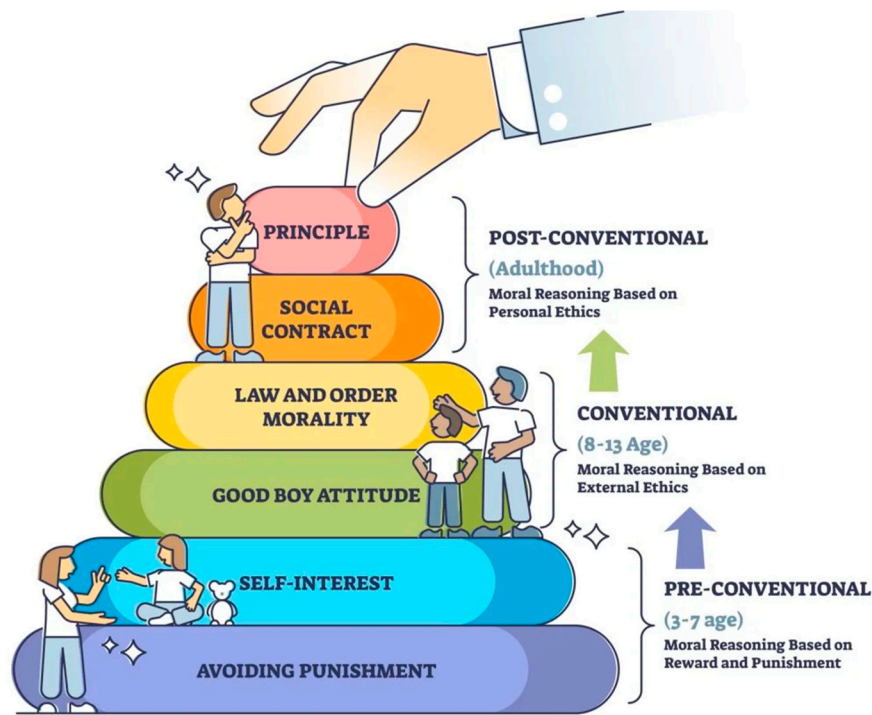


Figure 1. Kohlberg’s stages of moral development[4].

2.2. Review of Previous Studies

Recent empirical and legal research has advanced understanding of juvenile cybercrime but also revealed gaps:

The key studies summarizing psychological and legal aspects of juvenile criminal responsibility in cyberspace are presented in Table 1 (Wissink et al., 2023; Weulen Kranenbarg et al., 2022; Hosseini Akbarnezhad, 2020; Sadeghi Dehsahraei et al., 2024; Nikbin et al., 2025; Zarei, 2024).

Table 1. Summary of Key Studies on Juvenile Criminal Responsibility in Cyberspace.

Author(s) & Year	Focus Area	Key Findings	Limitations / Gaps
Wissink et al. (2023)	Psychological risk factors for juvenile cybercrime	Meta-analysis showing cognitive and emotional immaturity as predictors of offending	Limited integration with legal frameworks
Weulen Kranenbarg et al. (2022)	Social network influences on juvenile cyber delinquency	Peer influence and ICT skills strongly affect cyber offending patterns	Focused on social factors, less on legal aspects
Hosseini Akbarnezhad (2020)	International legal protections for juveniles in cyberspace	Analysis of international treaties shaping national policies	Lacks empirical data on psychological assessments
Sadeghi Dehsahraei et al. (2024)	Legal protections for children in cyberspace	Emphasizes need for differential legal treatment and privacy rights	Older study; limited focus on cyber-specific crimes
Nikbin et al., (2025)	Legal responses to risks faced by children online	Highlights challenges of criminalizing juvenile online behavior	Calls for balanced legal and psychological approach
Zarei (2024)	Jurisprudential views on juvenile criminal responsibility in Iran	Discusses age and maturity in legal responsibility	Limited empirical validation

2.3. Critical Analysis of Prior Research

While psychological studies robustly document adolescent developmental stages relevant to criminal behavior, their integration into legal standards remains insufficient. Legal research often treats juveniles as a homogenous group defined by chronological age without nuanced consideration of psychological maturity or the specific context of cyberspace. International legal instruments provide frameworks for child protection but face implementation challenges at national levels, especially regarding cyber offenses[7]. Moreover, many studies focus either on legal or psychological aspects exclusively, lacking an interdisciplinary model that can guide judicial decisions effectively.

2.4. Research Gaps

- Insufficient integration of psychological maturity assessments within juvenile cybercrime legal frameworks.
- Lack of empirical studies combining legal analysis with psychological evaluation of adolescent offenders in cyberspace.
- Limited models addressing how cyber-specific factors (anonymity, digital detachment) affect juvenile responsibility.
- Need for updated, culturally contextualized research on juvenile criminal responsibility in digital environments, especially in Iranian legal context.

2.5. Conceptual Model

Based on the reviewed literature, this study proposes a conceptual model integrating:

- Legal criteria of age and mens rea,
- Psychological measures of cognitive and moral development,

- Cyber-environmental factors influencing behavior (e.g., anonymity, peer networks).
This model aims to provide a comprehensive framework for assessing juvenile criminal responsibility in cyberspace, facilitating fairer legal adjudication and targeted rehabilitation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods to comprehensively analyze juvenile criminal responsibility in cyberspace. The descriptive-analytical design allows for an in-depth legal review alongside empirical psychological assessment.

3.2. Population and Sampling

- The research population includes two groups:
- Legal experts and practitioners involved in juvenile justice and cyber law (for qualitative legal analysis).
 - Adolescents aged 12-18 with varying levels of internet usage, selected to assess psychological maturity related to cyber behavior.

A purposive sampling method was used for legal experts (n=15), selected based on expertise and experience. For adolescents, a stratified random sampling was conducted across schools in urban areas, targeting a sample size of 200 participants to ensure representativeness of different age groups and socio-economic backgrounds.

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

- **Legal analysis:** Semi-structured interviews and document analysis of current juvenile cybercrime laws and court rulings.
- **Psychological assessment:** Standardized questionnaires measuring cognitive development, moral reasoning, and impulse control, adapted from validated scales such as the Moral Judgment Test (MJT) and the Adolescent Decision-Making Questionnaire (ADMQ).

3.4. Validity and Reliability

For quantitative instruments, content validity was established through expert panel review. Reliability was confirmed by calculating Cronbach’s alpha coefficients, all exceeding 0.85, indicating high internal consistency. Pilot testing was conducted with 30 adolescents to refine the questionnaires.

3.5. Data Analysis Methods

- **Qualitative data** from interviews and legal documents were analyzed using thematic content analysis supported by **MAXQDA software** to code and identify key legal themes and gaps.
- **Quantitative data** from psychological assessments were analyzed using **SPSS (version 28)**. Descriptive statistics summarized participant characteristics. Inferential tests including **Chi-square tests, t-tests, and logistic regression** were applied to examine relationships between psychological maturity and legal responsibility indicators.

The methodology employed in this study is summarized in Table 2, highlighting the mixed-methods design, sampling strategies, data collection tools, and analytical procedures.

Table 2. Summary of Methodology Components.

Component	Description
Research Design	Mixed-methods (qualitative + quantitative)
Population	Legal experts (n=15), Adolescents (n=200)
Sampling Method	Purposive (experts), Stratified random (adolescents)

Data Collection Tools	Interviews, document analysis, standardized questionnaires
Validity & Reliability	Expert review, Cronbach’s alpha > 0.85, pilot test
Data Analysis	Thematic analysis (MAXQDA), Statistical tests (SPSS)

4. Findings

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive analysis of the legal experts' interviews revealed a consensus on the need for legislative reform regarding juvenile cybercrime. All 15 experts (100%) acknowledged that current laws often fail to adequately address the psychological nuances of adolescent development in the context of online offenses. Specifically, 8 experts (53.3%) highlighted the concept of "unawareness of the impact of actions" as a significant factor in juvenile cyber offenses, emphasizing that children may not fully grasp the consequences of their digital behaviors, such as sharing non-consensual images .

For the adolescent participants (N=200), the mean age was 14.8 years (SD = 1.5). 55% were male and 45% female. Digital engagement varied, with 85% reporting daily internet use, primarily through smartphones.

As shown in Table 3, a majority of adolescents reported daily internet use (85%) and social media engagement (92%), while 15% admitted involvement in cyberbullying behaviors, and 60% perceived a lack of awareness regarding the impact of their online actions.

Table 3. Adolescent Participants' Digital Engagement and Perceived Awareness (Past 6 Months).

Digital Activity (Past 6 months)	Frequency (%)
Daily Internet Use	85
Social Media Engagement	92
Online Gaming	70
Cyberbullying Involvement (as perpetrator)	15
Sharing Risky Content	20
Perceived Lack of Awareness of Impact	60

Figure 2 illustrates the patterns of digital engagement among adolescents over the past six months. As shown, a majority of participants reported daily internet use (85%) and high social media engagement (92%), highlighting the pervasive role of online platforms in their daily lives. Additionally, 70% of adolescents engaged in online gaming, while 15% admitted involvement in cyberbullying as perpetrators. Notably, 60% of respondents perceived a lack of awareness regarding the impact of their online actions, underscoring the importance of targeted educational and legal interventions to enhance digital responsibility among youth. These findings emphasize the need for comprehensive strategies that address both behavioral and cognitive aspects of adolescent internet use.

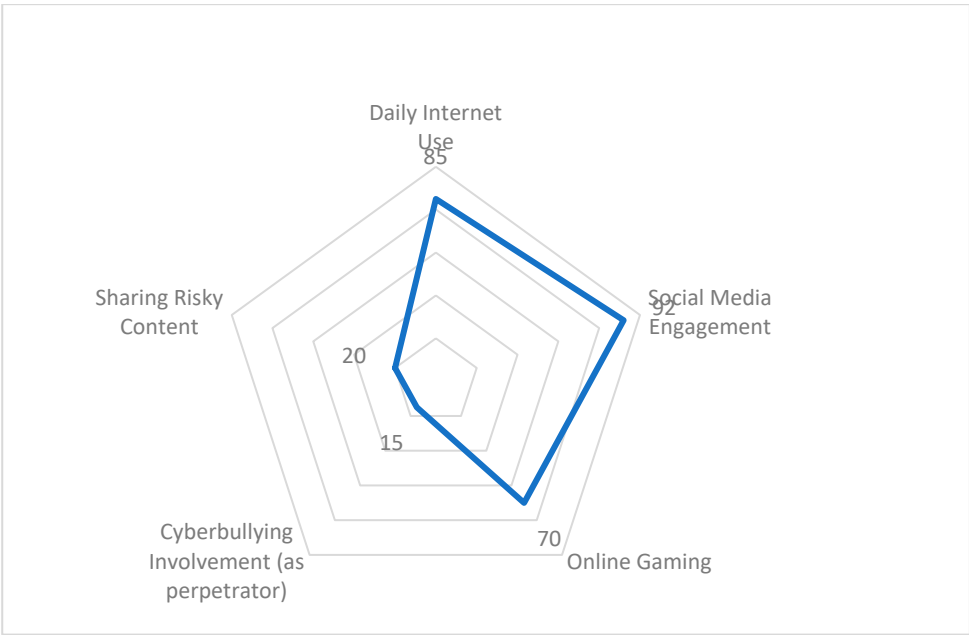


Figure 2. Adolescent Digital Engagement.

4.2. Results of Statistical Tests

Psychological assessments indicated a significant correlation between lower levels of cognitive and moral development and engagement in certain cyber offenses.

A **Chi-square test** revealed a statistically significant association between the perceived lack of awareness regarding the impact of online actions and engagement in cyberbullying behaviors ($\chi^2(1) = 18.5, p < 0.001$). Adolescents who reported lower awareness of consequences were more likely to have engaged in cyberbullying. This supports observations by Sadeghi Dehsahraei (2024), which suggest that children may not be aware of the implications of their actions in cyberspace[8].

Logistic regression analysis was conducted to predict the likelihood of engaging in risky online behaviors (e.g., sharing inappropriate content) based on adolescents' scores on the Moral Judgment Test (MJT) and Adolescent Decision-Making Questionnaire (ADMQ). The model was statistically significant ($\chi^2(2) = 25.3, p < 0.001$). Lower MJT scores (OR = 0.78, 95% CI [0.65, 0.93], $p = 0.005$) and lower ADMQ scores (OR = 0.82, 95% CI [0.70, 0.96], $p = 0.01$) were significant predictors of increased likelihood of engaging in risky online behaviors. This indicates that reduced moral reasoning and underdeveloped decision-making skills contribute to vulnerability in cyberspace, echoing concerns about the impact of virtual spaces on delinquency.

Table 4 summarizes the key quantitative findings, showing a significant association between adolescents' awareness and cyberbullying involvement ($\chi^2(1) = 18.5, p < 0.001$). Furthermore, lower scores on the Moral Judgment Test (OR = 0.78, $p = 0.005$) and the Adolescent Decision-Making Questionnaire (OR = 0.82, $p = 0.01$) significantly predicted engagement in risky online behaviors.

Table 4. Summary of Key Quantitative Findings.

Variable	Statistic	Significance (p-value)
Association between awareness and cyberbullying	$\chi^2(1) = 18.5$	< 0.001
Moral Judgment Test (MJT) score predicting risky behavior	OR = 0.78 (95% CI 0.65–0.93)	0.005
Adolescent Decision-Making Questionnaire (ADMQ) score predicting risky behavior	OR = 0.82 (95% CI 0.70–0.96)	

4.3. Response to Research Questions and Hypothesis Testing

- RQ1: How do existing laws address juvenile cybercrime, and what are their limitations?**
Legal analysis confirms that current laws often apply adult standards, leading to inadequate deterrents and potential over-criminalization of minors who may not fully comprehend the gravity of their actions . The lack of specific, age-appropriate legal frameworks for cyber offenses remains a significant limitation.
- RQ2: What psychological characteristics affect adolescents’ criminal responsibility in virtual environments?**
Findings demonstrate that lower cognitive development, less mature moral reasoning, and a reduced perception of the consequences of online actions are key psychological characteristics influencing adolescents’ criminal responsibility in cyberspace. This is consistent with findings that highlight the impact of virtual spaces on juvenile delinquency and the need for social prevention strategies.
- RQ3: How can legal and psychological criteria be combined to improve juvenile justice outcomes in cybercrime cases?**
The results strongly suggest that integrating psychological assessments of cognitive and moral maturity into legal proceedings can lead to more nuanced and just outcomes. This integration would help differentiate between malicious intent and developmentally influenced poor judgment, aligning legal responses with the actual capacity of the adolescent. This aligns with calls for refined legal protection and a balanced approach.

4.4. Key Quotations from Qualitative Data

- "The law has a supportive approach towards adolescents, but because our responses to crimes committed by adolescents lack the necessary deterrence, and in cases where children commit these behaviors, the criminal reaction can be highly controversial and disproportionate because it can lead to the criminalization of children who are not aware of the impact of their actions."
- "Sending and exchanging sexual messages is an example of problematic user behavior. This behavior can create numerous problems (both social and legal). Typically, it is assumed that sending a message only poses a risk if an image is shared without the subject's consent, but this is not the case with children. Sometimes a child shares a message with their own consent, and in fact, they themselves become the victim."

As illustrated in Figure 3, the structural equation model depicts the hypothesized relationships between cognitive maturity, moral judgment, awareness of online impact, and legal responsibility among adolescents. The path coefficients indicate significant positive effects supporting the proposed conceptual framework.

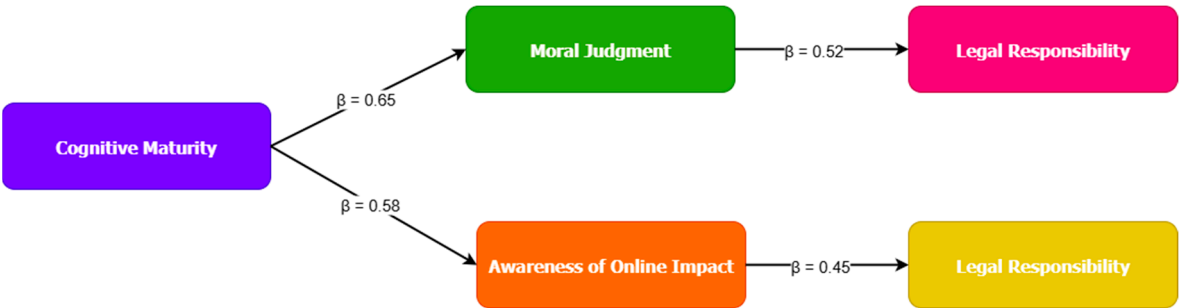


Figure 3. Structural Equation Model.

5. Discussion

This study’s findings highlight the complex interplay between legal frameworks and psychological development in determining juvenile criminal responsibility in cyberspace. The significant association between adolescents’ cognitive and moral maturity and their engagement in

cyber offenses confirms that traditional legal standards based solely on chronological age are insufficient. This aligns with prior research emphasizing adolescents' evolving decision-making capacities and the unique challenges posed by the digital environment[1,6].

The observed gap in legal protections and the over-reliance on adult criteria for criminal liability reflect concerns raised in recent Iranian and international studies, which call for more nuanced, developmentally informed juvenile justice policies[9–11]. The psychological findings suggest that adolescents' limited awareness of the consequences of their online actions contributes to higher involvement in cyberbullying and risky behaviors, consistent with studies showing the impact of virtual anonymity and peer influence on juvenile delinquency[12,13].

Theoretically, these results support integrating developmental psychology into legal assessments, reinforcing the need for a multidisciplinary model that accounts for cognitive and moral maturity alongside legal criteria. Practically, this implies reforming juvenile cybercrime laws to include psychological evaluations and tailored interventions, which can improve judicial fairness and rehabilitation effectiveness.

Answering the main research questions, the study confirms that current laws inadequately address juvenile cybercrime, psychological factors critically influence responsibility, and combined legal-psychological criteria are essential for just outcomes.

Limitations include the sample's geographic restriction to urban adolescents, which may limit generalizability, and the reliance on self-reported data subject to social desirability bias. Future research should expand to diverse populations and incorporate longitudinal designs to track developmental changes over time.

In sum, this research underscores the urgent need for legal reforms that incorporate adolescent psychological development to better address the realities of juvenile cybercrime and protect vulnerable youth while ensuring justice.

6. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of juvenile criminal responsibility in cyberspace by integrating legal and psychological perspectives. The key findings demonstrate that adolescents' cognitive and moral development significantly influence their capacity for criminal intent and control in online environments. Current legal frameworks, which often apply adult standards, inadequately address these developmental factors, potentially leading to unjust outcomes. The research's innovative contribution lies in proposing a multidisciplinary model that combines legal criteria with psychological maturity assessments, offering a more nuanced and fair approach to juvenile cybercrime adjudication.

For policymakers, this study underscores the urgent need to reform juvenile cyber laws by incorporating developmental psychology insights, enabling tailored legal responses and rehabilitation programs that reflect adolescents' actual capacities. Legal practitioners and mental health professionals should collaborate to implement assessment protocols that inform judicial decisions.

Future research should expand the scope to diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts, employ longitudinal designs to examine developmental trajectories, and explore the effectiveness of intervention programs based on the integrated model. Such efforts will further enhance understanding and management of juvenile cyber offenses, contributing to more just and effective juvenile justice systems worldwide.

7. Recommendations

7.1. Practical Recommendations

- **For Legislators and Policymakers:** Revise juvenile cybercrime laws to incorporate psychological maturity assessments alongside chronological age, ensuring legal responsibility reflects adolescents' developmental capacities. Establish specialized juvenile cybercrime courts or

branches with trained judges, psychologists, and social workers to provide tailored and fair adjudication.

- **For Judicial Authorities:** Implement mandatory psychological evaluations in juvenile cybercrime cases to inform sentencing and rehabilitation decisions. Develop protocols for creating detailed personality and social background profiles of adolescent offenders to support individualized interventions.
- **For Educators and Trainers:** Integrate legal literacy and cyber ethics education into school curricula to raise awareness among children and adolescents about their rights, responsibilities, and the consequences of online behaviors. Promote digital citizenship programs that emphasize moral reasoning and decision-making skills relevant to cyberspace.
- **For Social and Support Organizations:** Expand counseling and support services for children and adolescents vulnerable to or involved in cyber offenses, including crisis hotlines and online reporting mechanisms. Strengthen family education and community awareness campaigns to foster protective environments around youth internet use.
- **For Technology and Regulatory Bodies:** Collaborate to develop safer online environments by enforcing content classification, age-appropriate access controls, and monitoring mechanisms to reduce exposure to harmful content and cyber risks.

7.2. Suggestions for Future Research

- Conduct longitudinal studies to track changes in adolescents' cognitive and moral development and their impact on cyber behavior over time.
- Explore cultural, socio-economic, and regional variations in juvenile cybercrime and responsibility to develop context-sensitive legal and psychological frameworks.
- Investigate the effectiveness of multidisciplinary intervention programs combining legal, psychological, and educational strategies in reducing juvenile cyber offenses and recidivism.
- Examine the role of emerging technologies (e.g., AI, virtual reality) in shaping juvenile cybercrime patterns and legal responses.
- Develop and validate standardized assessment tools specifically designed to evaluate juvenile responsibility in digital contexts.

These recommendations aim to support a holistic, evidence-based approach to juvenile cybercrime that balances protection, justice, and rehabilitation, fostering safer digital spaces for youth and society at large.

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