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Understanding youth responses to digital violence: A qualitative exploration of risk and resilience

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how young people experience, interpret, and respond to digital violence within contemporary media environments. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 25 participants aged 18-25, the research employs thematic analysis to examine the intersection of digital behavior, media literacy, and violence prevention. Findings reveal three overarching themes: (1) experiences of digital violence, (2) prevention and coping strategies, and (3) digital media awareness and usage motivations. Participants reported frequent exposure to cyberbullying, threats, digital dating abuse, and privacy violations, often facilitated by platform anonymity and weak regulatory safeguards. Coping responses primarily involved blocking, reporting, and seeking informal support from peers and family, while institutional and legal mechanisms were viewed as inadequate. Media literacy emerged as both a protective and enabling factor—informing preventive awareness but also revealing gaps that amplify online aggression. The study highlights the need for comprehensive digital citizenship education, platform accountability, and policy reforms addressing technology-facilitated violence. These findings contribute to the growing discourse on youth digital resilience and the dual role of media in both perpetuating and preventing online violence.

Keywords: youth, online violence, cyberbullying, digital dating abuse, media literacy, digital resilience

INTRODUCTION

A growing body of scholarship documents how youth are disproportionately exposed to cyber violence, encompassing behaviors such as cyberbullying, digital dating abuse, image-based sexual abuse, and identity-based harassment (Akın & Uysal, 2023; Woodlock, 2017). These forms of violence are frequently perpetrated through both interpersonal networks and anonymous interactions, enabled by the accessibility and anonymity of digital tools. Research by Brown et al. (2022) demonstrates that gendered power dynamics remain central to these interactions: males are more likely to exert technological control, while females experience heightened emotional, social, and psychological repercussions. Similarly, Fiolet et al. (2021) found that digital technologies enable perpetrators to extend coercive control through online surveillance and intimidation.

Social media further contributes to the normalization of coercive behaviors in adolescent relationships. Persistent messaging, location tracking, and sexual pressure via direct messages are increasingly framed as expressions of intimacy rather than control (Reed et al., 2016; Rodenhizer & Edwards, 2019). Beyond relational contexts, cyberbullying remains one of the most pervasive and psychologically damaging forms of digital aggression. Defined as repeated harm inflicted through electronic communication tools (Best et al., 2014), cyberbullying has been empirically linked to anxiety, depression, diminished self-esteem, and academic difficulties (Giumetti & Kowalski, 2024; Rice et al., 2015). Therefore, the anonymity, permanence, and viral reach of digital communication amplify the emotional toll of such victimization, particularly among adolescents whose developmental stages heighten sensitivity to social rejection.

Despite these risks, digital spaces also present opportunities for resilience and social transformation. Many youths demonstrate agency by adopting informal coping strategies—such as blocking, reporting, or mobilizing peer support—to mitigate harm (Şener & Abınık, 2021). Moreover, digital media have emerged as platforms for collective empowerment, with social justice movements exemplifying how online testimony can challenge cultures of silence and mobilize institutional reform (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Powell & Henry, 2017).

Recent research has expanded understanding of technology-facilitated violence among youth by highlighting both the structural and psychosocial dynamics shaping online aggression and vulnerability. For example, Milne et al. (2026) demonstrated that Snapchat's platform-specific affordances—such as ephemeral "snaps," algorithmic "quick adds," and

location-based "snap maps"—have transformed digital intimacy into a space fraught with gendered risks. Their study revealed how young users' pursuit of connection and validation intersects with surveillance, coercion, and sexualized violence, creating a paradox where the same technologies that enable social bonding also normalize risk-taking and exposure. This aligns with earlier concerns about the role of digital design in amplifying technology-facilitated gender-based harms. Complementing this, Amadori and Brighi (2025) examined technology-facilitated sexual violence among sexual and gender minority youth, identifying online disinhibition and impulsivity as key predictors of victimization, while socio-emotional competence and digital resilience emerged as protective factors. Their findings illustrate the need for prevention programs that address structural inequities and strengthen digital resilience, particularly among marginalized youth who face disproportionate exposure to online sexual aggression. Together, these studies reveal a critical intersection between platform architecture, psychosocial vulnerability, and youth digital cultures—calling for integrative strategies that combine digital literacy, emotional regulation, and platform accountability in mitigating online violence.

Notably, youth exposure to online victimization must be understood within the broader dynamics of digital addiction, algorithmic amplification, and intensive platform engagement. For example, bibliometric analyses show that digital addiction research has increasingly emphasized how algorithmic design, social rewards, and compulsive use patterns shape young people's online behaviors and emotional regulation (Karakose et al., 2022). Moreover, excessive and dysregulated digital media use has been linked to reduced self-control. This also heightened emotional vulnerability, and impaired academic functioning, all of which may indirectly increase susceptibility to technology-facilitated aggression and coercion (Tülübaş et al., 2023). Algorithmically curated environments can normalize prolonged exposure to risky interactions while reinforcing harmful behavioral scripts. These findings complicate binary accounts of digital media as either harmful or beneficial, instead highlighting its dual role as a space for connection and learning, while simultaneously structuring conditions that elevate risk for online victimization and social harm.

Taken together, these studies highlight the dual nature of digital media: as both a facilitator of violence and a means of empowerment. However, existing research remains fragmented, often examining isolated forms of online harm without fully considering how young people interpret, internalize, and resist these experiences within broader digital ecosystems. This study therefore investigates how youth perceive and navigate digital violence and the coping mechanisms they develop in response.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical perspectives that explain how digital media shapes youth experiences of violence: social learning theory (SLT) and a risk and resilience model within media-violence scholarship. Integrating these frameworks, the study aims to examine how exposure to digital environments contributes to the learning, normalization, and contestation of violent and coercive behaviors, while also identifying the individual and social resources that enable young people to cope with and resist such harms.

Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura's SLT posits that individuals learn behaviors—including aggression—by observing and imitating models in their environment, and by processing vicarious reinforcement and punishment (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Media extend that environment: violent, threatening or coercive content viewed via digital platforms can serve as models, with anonymity and repeated exposure weakening the natural disinhibition of aggression (Şengönül, 2017). In the present study, participants reported direct threats, harassment, and digital dating abuse—consistent with modelling of aggressive behaviors in online contexts. The SLT lens helps explain how exposure to violent digital practices (e.g., sharing intimate images, coerced password access) can lead to internalization of scripts of control and violence, and thus real-life or online perpetration.

Risk and Resilience Model in Media Violence

Recent meta-analyses and longitudinal research suggest that media violence influences youth not only through direct exposure but via a complex interplay of risk and protective factors (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Masten, 2001). The risk-and-resilience framework identifies key processes such as sensitization, desensitization, cognitive schema formation, coping responses, and protective factors (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Ferguson, 2015). Specifically, children and adolescents who repeatedly witness violent content may develop hostile schemas or aggression-supportive beliefs, which in turn increase risk of violent behaviors (Huesmann et al., 2003; Şengönül, 2017). Conversely, resilience factors—such as media literacy, peer/family support, and active coping strategies—can buffer adverse effects (Freed et al., 2025). The current study's findings align with this model: youth described not only their violent exposures but also how blocking/reporting, family support, and media-awareness shaped their coping. The risk/resilience lens highlights the dual role of digital media: a potential risk environment for violence, but also a site for resilience-building via informed use, literacy, and support mechanisms.

Together, these theories offer a comprehensive understanding of how young adults cope with digital media environments: how violent content is modelled and internalized and how individual, relational and contextual factors mediate the effects of exposure and support coping. The three themes derived from our empirical work—types of digital violence, coping strategies, and media awareness and usage—map directly onto these theoretical constructs and enhance our ability to interpret youth experiences of digital violence.

METHOD

Research Design and Objectives

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore

(1) young adults' lived experiences of digital violence,

(2) how digital media influences their awareness and interpretation of dating violence, and

Table 1. Demographic and internet usage characteristics of participants (n = 25)

Characteristic	n	%
Age		
18-20	6	24
21-22	6	24
23-25	13	52
Gender		
Female	17	68
Male	8	32
Education level		
Currently in college	6	24
Bachelor's student	9	36
Graduate student	3	12
University graduate & employed	7	28
Place of residence		
Metropolitan	11	44
Urban (city center)	10	40
Rural (village)	4	16
Most frequently used devices		
Smartphone	6	24
Smartphone + PC	13	52
Smartphone + PC + Smart TV	4	16
Smartphone + PC + Game Console	2	8
Most used social media combinations		
Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube	13	52
Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat	4	16
Instagram, X (Twitter), WhatsApp	3	12
WhatsApp, X, YouTube	2	8
Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, WhatsApp	2	8
Primary purposes of digital media use		
Entertainment (videos, music, games)	25	100
Social connection & communication	21	84
News consumption (current events)	18	72
Academic/informational use	6	24
Activism & social advocacy	2	8

(3) the strategies they employ to cope with, prevent, and respond to digital violence.

By linking everyday digital practices to broader processes of risk and resilience, the study aims to advance a theoretically informed understanding of youth agency within technology-facilitated violence contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University's Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee (protocol number: 2025-SBB-0150) was obtained prior to the study. All participants were informed of the purpose of research, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw without penalty. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation. The research process followed APA ethical standards, ensuring no deception, coercion, or harm.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted between February and April 2025. Interviews were held in person (N: 21) and via secure online platforms (N: 4), lasting approximately 30-45 minutes each. With informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide included open-ended prompts such as: "How does digital media affect your awareness of dating violence?" "How do you encounter and interpret violent content online?" "Have you ever experienced or engaged in cyberbullying?" "Can digital media serve as a tool for violence prevention?" Moreover, reflective field notes were taken post-interview to supplement the transcripts.

Participants and Sampling

The study included 25 university students aged 18-25, selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity and relevance to the research focus. Inclusion criteria required participants to

(1) actively use digital media,

(2) have encountered violent or aggressive online content (e.g., in social media, gaming, or digital news),

(3) possess experience with multiple digital tools, and

(4) represent variation in gender, academic field, and media-use patterns.

The sample size was determined by data saturation, with recruitment ceasing once no new codes or insights emerged during thematic analysis.

Participant recruitment and data collection were conducted by the second through sixth authors, all master of social work students trained in qualitative interviewing. These researchers identified potential participants through their academic and social networks, initiated contact via telephone to explain the study's purpose, and subsequently conducted in-person, semi-structured interviews. This approach facilitated rapport, contextual depth, and reflexive engagement with participants' lived experiences of digital media and violence.

Table 1 presents the demographic and internet usage characteristics of the 25 participants. The sample consisted predominantly of young adults aged 23-25 (52%), with a majority identifying as female (68%). Most participants were either university students or recent graduates, reflecting a high level of educational engagement. In terms of residence, 44% lived in metropolitan areas, while 40% resided in urban centers, and 16% in rural settings. The majority reported using a combination of smartphones and personal computers (52%), suggesting a high level of digital accessibility. Regarding social media usage, Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube were the most common platform combination (52%). All participants used digital media primarily for entertainment, with substantial engagement also in communication (84%) and news consumption (72%). Fewer participants indicated academic (24%) or activist (8%) uses. These findings underscore the centrality of visual, interactive, and communicative digital environments in the daily lives of digitally active youth.

Moreover, **Table 1** shows that Instagram is the most widely used platform, with 100% of participants reporting active use. WhatsApp followed at 88%, and YouTube ranked third at 80%. Other platforms included TikTok (40%), Twitter/X (36%), and Snapchat (28%). These findings indicate a clear preference for visually driven and real-time communication platforms. Instagram and YouTube serve dual purposes—both entertainment and information—while WhatsApp functions primarily as a continuous communication tool. Notably, these platforms also emerge as the primary digital spaces where participants encounter or witness digital violence.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through thematic analysis, guided by SLT (Bandura & Walters, 1977) and the risk and resilience model (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Masten, 2001) to

Table 2. Coding framework and thematic development

Analytic phase	Process description	Illustrative outcome	Theoretical anchor
1. Familiarization with data	Reading transcripts repeatedly to identify core experiences and emotional tones.	Highlighted narratives on online harassment, coping, and awareness.	Grounded understanding of lived experience.
2. Generating initial codes	Line-by-line inductive coding in NVivo capturing descriptive and emotional content.	Codes: “harassment,” “threats,” “blocking,” “reporting,” “empowerment.”	SLT—behavior observation and imitation.
3. Searching for themes	Clustering related codes into conceptual families.	Subthemes: “cyberbullying,” “digital dating abuse,” “awareness.”	Risk identification.
4. Reviewing themes	Revisiting data to ensure coherence across participant narratives.	Consolidation into core categories.	Cross-validation of risk/protective factors.
5. Defining and naming themes	Articulating relationships between patterns and theory.	Final themes reflect learning, risk, and coping dynamics.	Integration of SLT and resilience theory.
6. Producing the report	Writing analytic narratives with participant voices and theoretical insights.	Thematic interpretation of how youth navigate online violence.	Theory-informed explanation.

contextualize how young individuals experience, interpret, and respond to digital violence. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2019) six-phase model,

(1) data familiarization,

(2) generating initial codes,

(3) searching for themes,

(4) reviewing themes,

(5) defining and naming themes, and

(6) producing the report,

which supported by NVivo 12 software to ensure systematic organization and traceability of codes.

Using SLT, the analysis examined how participants observe, model, and internalize behaviors encountered in digital spaces—particularly aggressive or violent interactions—and how online norms reinforce or discourage such conduct. SLT provided an interpretive framework for understanding the imitative mechanisms of cyber-aggression and the reinforcement cycles sustained by online anonymity, attention, and peer validation (Bandura, 2009).

Simultaneously, the risk and resilience model informed the interpretation of coping and prevention strategies. It guided the identification of risk factors (e.g., exposure to online threats, identity theft, gendered harassment) and protective factors (e.g., digital literacy, peer support, adaptive coping). This dual framework enabled a layered understanding of digital violence as both a learned social behavior and a stress-response phenomenon moderated by personal, social, and environmental.

Coding process

Analysis began with open coding, identifying recurring meaning units related to digital violence experiences, coping behaviors, and perceptions of media influence (see **Table 2**). These initial codes were iteratively refined through axial coding, grouping conceptually related segments under broader categories informed by the theoretical lens. Reflexive memos documented interpretive decisions, while peer debriefing sessions were used to validate coding coherence.

The final three core themes,

(1) experiences of digital violence,

(2) coping and preventive strategies, and

(3) media awareness and usage purposes,

which emerged through iterative review and theoretical abstraction. Each theme integrated micro-level behavioral insights from SLT and macro-level ecological interpretations from the risk and resilience model, reflecting the complex interplay between learned digital aggression and adaptive coping mechanisms within online environments.

This dual-theoretical approach enabled a multidimensional interpretation of youth digital experiences: SLT illuminated how violent digital behaviors are socially learned and normalized through observation and reinforcement, whereas the risk and resilience model contextualized how individual and social supports mitigate these risks. The reflexive, iterative process positioned researchers as co-interpreters, emphasizing meaning-making rather than mechanical coding reliability (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002).

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, multiple strategies were implemented. For instance, methodological and theoretical triangulation were used, including cross-checking transcripts, theory-based coding (e.g., intersectionality, Duluth model), and integrating field notes (Neuman, 2014). Also, the first three authors independently coded the transcripts and resolved discrepancies through discussion until reaching full consensus on the definition and interpretation of each theme (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2014).

By using expert audit, an external qualitative research expert reviewed the coding schema and interpretation for consistency (Squires & Dorsen, 2018). Notably, researchers maintained reflective journals to document positionality, assumptions, and potential biases (Finlay, 2002; Pillow, 2003). This continuous self-awareness aimed to minimize power imbalances between researchers and participants (Britten, 1995; DeVault & Gross, 2012). Furthermore, member validation was also used. Data storage, consent, and confidentiality procedures followed institutional guidelines, with participant comfort and autonomy prioritized throughout. These procedures enhanced both the depth and credibility of the analysis by integrating multiple interpretive perspectives and ensuring ethical transparency.

This study adhered to the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) checklist to ensure methodological rigor and transparency (Tong et al., 2007). The checklist guided reporting across all three COREQ domains:

(1) research team and reflexivity, including interviewer characteristics, positionality, and reflexive engagement,

(2) study design, encompassing purposive sampling, participant recruitment, interview setting, and data saturation, and

Table 3. Themes and sub-themes

Main theme	Sub-themes
1. Experiences of digital violence	Cyberbullying and threatening behaviors Digital dating abuse and privacy violations
2. Prevention and coping strategies	Blocking, reporting, and legal responses Support from family and social networks
3. Digital media awareness and usage	Awareness and media literacy Perceived positive/negative effects of digital media

(3) data analysis and reporting, detailing transcription procedures, inductive thematic analysis, use of NVivo software, iterative coding, peer debriefing, and consensus-building among coders.

By systematically addressing these criteria, the study enhances credibility, dependability, and confirmability, thereby strengthening the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings. Moreover, this study employed a reflexive framework, recognizing researchers as active co-constructors of meaning rather than neutral observers (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002). Reflexivity was treated as an ongoing analytic practice—an engagement with how identities, emotions, and positionalities shape data production, interpretation, and ethical relations (Pillow, 2003).

The research team comprised master's students in social work who conducted semi-structured interviews with youths. Their diverse positionalities generated both rapport and reflexive tension. Female researchers often found that gender similarity fostered safety and disclosure in recounting experiences of digital violence, yet their academic or institutional affiliations occasionally positioned them as authority figures, subtly shaping participants' narratives (England, 1994; Goffman, 2023). For some, prior social connections facilitated openness but also risked social desirability bias, reflecting the fluid "insider-outsider" continuum described by Dwyer and Buckle (2009). Male researcher similarly navigated shared cultural and institutional contexts that encouraged trust and unexpected self-disclosure, leading to moments of "methodological surprise" (Davies, 2012) and ethical self-questioning. Across all cases, relational proximity required continual negotiation between empathy and analytical distance, aligning with feminist methodological principles that seek to minimize hierarchy and promote reciprocity (Hesse-Biber, 2012).

Reflexivity in this study thus extended beyond acknowledging bias; it functioned as an iterative, ethical stance that interrogated power, positionality, and the co-production of knowledge. Consistent with feminist and critical traditions, we understand that insight into digital violence among youth emerges through this relational engagement—where identity, emotion, and interpretation remain dynamically intertwined (Rose, 1997).

FINDINGS

Thematic analysis revealed a multifaceted understanding of how young individuals experience, respond to, and interpret violence within digital media environments. Data were organized under three central themes:

(1) types and experiences of digital violence,

(2) prevention and coping strategies, and

(3) digital media awareness and usage purposes.

Across these themes, participants' narratives reflected both risk amplification and resilience-building processes, consistent with the risk and resilience model (Rutter, 2012), while also demonstrating the observational learning mechanisms proposed by SLT (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Participants not only encountered aggressive behaviors online but also internalized, mimicked, resisted, or redefined these behaviors through social interaction and media exposure. **Table 3** shows the themes and sub-themes.

Theme 1. Experiences of Digital Violence

Most participants reported encountering various forms of digital violence, primarily cyberbullying and digital dating abuse. Consistent with SLT, online aggression is often operated through modeling and reinforcement mechanisms: observing peers' or influencers' aggressive communication normalized hostile interactions (Bandura, 2009). Participants described how repeated exposure to verbal aggression, threats, or sexually explicit content shaped both their tolerance and behavioral scripts for online interaction.

Cyberbullying and threatening behaviors

Participants detailed two recurrent patterns:

(1) direct threats and harassment and

(2) identity-based violations.

As one participant explained, "I've received threatening messages from people I didn't know" (P1, male, undergraduate). These experiences mirror Bandura and Walters' (1977) notion of vicarious reinforcement, where witnessing or experiencing aggression—without meaningful consequence to perpetrators—reinforces its perceived acceptability. Female participants disproportionately reported gendered abuse and sexualized harassment, reflecting broader gendered learning structures in digital environments.

The risk and resilience model helps contextualize how such exposures compound psychosocial risk. Participants who experienced identity theft, reputational damage, or public humiliation reported heightened anxiety and social withdrawal: "My Instagram account was hacked … I couldn't sleep thinking about what they might be doing" (P12, female, 7+ hours/day). These emotional responses indicate risk accumulation—where exposure to multiple forms of digital harm increases vulnerability. However, several participants also displayed adaptive coping responses, such as digital vigilance and boundary-setting, signaling emerging resilience within hostile online environments. For instance, in several cases, participants described how the anonymity of perpetrators and the algorithmic amplification of harmful content intensified feelings of helplessness.

Participant also counts reveal sustained exposure to intimidation and fear-based control, particularly through implicit and explicit threats: "I'll contact your family—you could end up in inappropriate situations," he said. "I can

handle Photoshop and editing—anything." (P9, female, undergraduate, 6+ hrs/day) This quotation illustrates how threats operate not only as isolated acts but as ongoing psychological pressure embedded in digital communication.

Digital dating violence and privacy violations

This theme examines how romantic and intimate relationships become digital arenas of power, control, and surveillance, revealing the normalization of coercive behaviors within online interactions. Two patterns emerged:

(1) privacy invasion and digital surveillance and

(2) post-breakup digital abuse and threats.

Participants frequently described patterns of coercive control that reflect both learned aggression and adaptive coping processes. For example, many participants recounted instances of boundary violations, such as forced password sharing, constant monitoring, or restrictions on social interactions: "My girlfriend wanted access to my account. I felt it was a violation of my privacy." (P1, male, undergraduate, 3-5 hrs/day) "She restricted my social media use and friend circle." (P14, female, undergraduate, 7+ hrs/day)

From an SLT perspective, such controlling behaviors represent learned relational scripts transmitted through both media and peer environments, where dominance and surveillance are framed as indicators of commitment or trust. These acts mirror broader social norms that valorize possessiveness in romantic contexts—a form of symbolic violence reproduced through everyday digital practices. The digital affordances of constant connectivity and algorithmic visibility (e.g., "last seen," read receipts, or location tracking) facilitate this control, transforming technology into a mediator of relational power (Milne et al., 2026).

Moreover, digital dating abuse emerged as prolonged coercion characterized by unwanted persistence and surveillance: "I was not allowed to end the relationship in any way. When I wanted to break up, I was subjected to various forms of harassment and threats …" (P10, female, undergraduate, 8+ hrs/day) Similarly, participants reported enduring harassment, including stalking, threats, and revenge-based coercion: "He said, 'I'll kill you' and kept threatening me after I ended things." (P3, female, undergraduate, 1-3 hrs/day) "He said he'd send my private photos to my family if I didn't comply." (P11, female, college student, 7+ hrs/day) These narratives reveal how digital spaces perpetuate control beyond physical relationships through persistent communication channels. The performative and anonymous nature of social media intensifies this aggression through public humiliation and image-based threats, exemplifying technology-facilitated sexual violence driven by online disinhibition and impulsivity (Amadori & Brighi, 2025).

From a risk and resilience standpoint, participants' experiences highlight both accumulated psychosocial risks (e.g., emotional distress, stigma, reputational damage) and protective responses (e.g., blocking, legal recourse, peer support). Many expressed frustrations with institutional inaction—"I went to the police, but nothing came of it" (P25, male, undergraduate, 3-5 hrs/day)—reflecting systemic barriers that undermine resilience-building processes. Nevertheless, several participants demonstrated adaptive digital resilience, characterized by strategic boundary-setting, selective disclosure, and reliance on trusted peers. Such coping strategies align with research showing that digital resilience buffers the emotional impact of technology-facilitated abuse (Amadori & Brighi, 2025).

Theme 2. Prevention and Coping Strategies

Participants' responses to digital violence reveal not only what strategies they used, but how these strategies were learned, reinforced, and constrained within their digital ecologies. Two interrelated subthemes emerged:

(1) blocking, reporting, and legal action and

(2) family and peer support.

Together, these practices reflect adaptive responses shaped by social modeling and uneven institutional protection.

Blocking, reporting, and legal action

From the lens of SLT (Bandura, 2009), participants' reliance on blocking and reporting reflects learned boundary-setting behaviors modeled within peer networks and platform cultures where self-protection is normalized as the primary response to online aggression (Bandura, 2009). Blocking was frequently described as an effective way to reassert agency and interrupt cycles of harassment: "I blocked them from all platforms; once they had nowhere to reach me, it ended" (P14, female, undergraduate, 7+ hrs/day)—illustrating a shift from passive victimhood to active boundary-setting.

This shift from endurance to active disengagement illustrates how youth internalize digitally mediated norms of self-regulation in environments where formal enforcement is weak. Advanced platform affordances—such as blocking linked accounts—were interpreted as empowering tools that enhance perceived control: "Instagram's new feature blocks other accounts from the same device. It really works." (P13, female, undergraduate, 1-3 hrs/day) Although many reported content, the effectiveness of reporting was inconsistent:

However, reporting mechanisms and legal recourse exposed the limits of institutional reinforcement. Although reporting symbolized an attempt to restore normative accountability, participants frequently expressed skepticism about its effectiveness: "A fine of 1,000 TL won't deter anyone. We need stricter laws" (P14, female, undergraduate, 7+ hrs/day) "Reporting doesn't always work, but I use it when needed." (P1, male, undergraduate, 3-5 hrs/day)

Viewed through the risk and resilience model, these strategies embody both protective mechanisms and systemic vulnerabilities. While digital affordances such as blocking tools reduce immediate exposure to harm, limited enforcement and inconsistent reporting outcomes constrain resilience development (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). The findings highlight that individual resilience—manifested through selective avoidance, emotional regulation, and help-seeking—can mitigate psychosocial risks but cannot substitute for structural safeguards like stronger legal frameworks and platform accountability. Hence, resilience must be conceptualized not only as personal adaptability but as a socially supported and policy-enabled capacity within the broader digital ecology.

Family and social support

This subtheme highlights the pivotal role of interpersonal networks in mediating the emotional and behavioral responses of youth to digital violence. While institutional mechanisms were often perceived as ineffective, participants

emphasized the protective function of peer and family support in fostering coping and resilience. Drawing on the risk and resilience model, these findings suggest that such relational supports act as external protective factors, buffering the psychological impacts of victimization and reinforcing adaptive coping behaviors (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

Although few participants disclosed their experiences to family members, those who did reported emotional relief and practical guidance—"Eventually, I told my family. My mom helped a lot" (P12)—illustrating how empathetic family engagement can mitigate stress responses. However, stigma and cultural expectations, particularly in smaller communities, constrained open communication: "I couldn't tell my family. In small towns, it's complicated" (P13, female, undergraduate, 1-3 hrs/day). This reluctance underscores socio-cultural barriers that limit familial resilience-building and perpetuate silence around digital abuse. Likewise, family disclosure was inhibited by anticipated blame and stigma: "I think that if my family finds out, they won't stand by me … they would blame me instead." (P10, female, undergraduate, 8+ hrs/day)

Peer relationships, by contrast, emerged as the primary resilience resource, offering validation, emotional safety, and shared digital literacy. Peers modeled adaptive responses—such as blocking aggressors, seeking legal recourse, or reframing victimization—that shaped participants' coping repertoires. As one participant noted, "My close friend reassured me, saying I had nothing to be ashamed of" (P11, female, college student, 7+ hrs/day), reflecting how social reinforcement contributes to the internalization of resilient behaviors.

Therefore, these findings reveal that social support operates as both a learned behavior and a resilience pathway. In the absence of robust institutional or platform-based interventions, relational networks—particularly peers—serve as critical buffers that foster agency, normalize help-seeking, and sustain emotional stability. Strengthening digital literacy initiatives that engage families and peers simultaneously can thus enhance both individual and collective resilience against technology-facilitated violence.

Theme 3. Digital Media Awareness and Usage Purposes

This theme captures how young people conceptualize and navigate digital media as both a site of risk and a tool for resilience. Two subthemes emerged:

(1) media awareness and literacy and

(2) the dual psychosocial effects of digital engagement.

Participants expressed that social media simultaneously fosters consciousness about violence and facilitates aggression through anonymity and algorithmic amplification. This paradox underscores the complex interplay between risk exposure, behavioral modeling, and resilience formation in digital environments.

Awareness and media literacy

Participants demonstrated varying degrees of critical media literacy, reflecting differing capacities to interpret, filter, and respond to violent or discriminatory content. For example, exposure to positive digital role models—such as influencers promoting gender equality or psychological well-being—was perceived to reinforce prosocial norms and behavioral regulation: "When you follow positive people, social media guides your behavior" (P18, male, university graduate, 5-7 hrs/day). Conversely, anonymity and lack of accountability online were seen to encourage aggression, mirroring SLT's emphasis on observational learning without consequences: "People vent their anger online in ways they wouldn't face-to-face" (P21, female, undergraduate, 5-7 hrs/day).

At the same time, participants highlighted that informative digital content (e.g., short videos on gender-based violence or mental health) served as preventive tools, fostering emotional awareness and critical reflection. These findings illustrate that digital literacy functions as a resilience mechanism, enabling youth to resist harmful modeling and engage in more reflective, self-regulated online practices. In line with the risk and resilience model (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005), media literacy operates as an adaptive competency that mitigates the psychosocial risks of exposure to online aggression.

Positive and negative aspects of digital media

Participants' narratives revealed that digital media produces dual emotional and behavioral outcomes. Positive engagement—through educational or inspirational content—enhanced motivation, empathy, and social belonging, acting as a protective factor that supports mental well-being. For instance: "I watched study videos while preparing for university. They motivated me to study." (P2, female, graduate student, 5-7 hrs/day) Furthermore, several mentioned how professional content shaped aspirations: "As a paramedic student, I follow field-related accounts that inspire my career goals." (P14, female, undergraduate, 7+ hrs/day) "Educational content broadens my perspective and helps set goals." (P25, male, undergraduate, 3-5 hrs/day) Social media also fostered emotional connection and community: "I follow my favorite team—it makes me happy." (P5, male, graduate, 3-5 hrs/day) "I share feel-good videos with others—they improve my mood." (P21, female, undergraduate, 5-7 hrs/day)

However, repeated exposure to aggression, competition, and comparison intensified emotional vulnerability and normalized hostility, reflecting a cumulative risk effect within digital ecosystems. Digital media's emotional influence varies based on user psychology and intent. As P7 observed: "If someone already has violent tendencies, digital media can make it worse." (P7, male, graduate, 3-5 hrs/day)

The interplay of these forces exemplifies how youth learn, internalize, and contest social norms online. On one hand, social media provides visibility to counter-violence movements and emotional support networks; on the other, it perpetuates harmful scripts through imitation and reward cycles. The findings thus affirm that digital media awareness is not merely cognitive but relational—shaped by social modeling, perceived efficacy, and community feedback. Fostering resilience, therefore, requires educational and policy interventions that strengthen socio-emotional competence, critical consumption skills, and algorithmic transparency, empowering youth to navigate digital risks with agency and reflexivity.

Figure 1 illustrates the interplay between risk, resilience, and social learning in shaping youth experiences with digital violence. The framework positions digital media as both a risk environment—where exposure to harmful content and coercive behaviors can normalize aggression—and a resilience context, where awareness, peer support, and media literacy foster adaptive coping. It emphasizes how protective factors—such as socio-emotional competence, digital literacy, and supportive networks—can buffer the psychological and social

harms of online aggression. Overall, the framework underscores that digital resilience is a dynamic process shaped by individual agency, community norms, and systemic safeguards, illustrating how youth actively negotiate digital risks while cultivating resistance and critical awareness.

DISCUSSION

This study highlights digital media's dual role as both a site of risk and a potential arena for resilience. Drawing on SLT (Bandura & Walters, 1977), participants' experiences illustrate how online aggression—such as harassment, coercion, and privacy violations—may be learned and reinforced through repeated exposure to violent models in digital spaces. Similar to earlier findings, our participants described behaviors consistent with cyber dating abuse and digital coercion, reflecting patterns identified in adolescent samples (Reed et al., 2016; Temple et al., 2016). Female participants, in particular, reported higher rates of gendered harassment, supporting prior work that associates digital aggression with unequal gender norms (Brown et al., 2022; Powell & Henry, 2017).

Furthermore, the findings showed that while digital platforms increase exposure to harm (risk), individual and contextual resources—such as media literacy, peer support, and active coping—serve as resilience factors. Participants who employed proactive strategies (e.g., blocking, reporting, or seeking support) reported reduced distress, consistent with research showing that resilience moderates the effects of cybervictimization on well-being (Fiolet et al., 2021; Marín-López et al., 2020).

Experiences of Digital Violence

Participants described varied forms of digital violence, ranging from cyberbullying to digital dating abuse. These findings align with prior studies showing that online harassment and privacy violations are widespread among youth populations (Dragiewicz et al., 2018; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). The accounts of non-consensual image sharing and coercive monitoring behaviors parallel prior research on technology-facilitated coercive control (Woodlock, 2017).

Applying SLT, such behaviors may be normalized through observation of aggression and social reinforcement within digital environments (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Anonymity and audience disinhibition, as noted by participants, further lower social accountability—mechanisms also identified in prior qualitative work on online disinhibition and moral disengagement (Lee et al., 2020).

Coping and Prevention Strategies

The second theme, centered on coping and prevention, revealed that participants primarily employed individual strategies such as blocking, reporting, and legal recourse, while institutional mechanisms were rarely accessed. This aligns with prior findings that self-directed coping remains the dominant strategy among digital abuse victims (Best et al., 2014; Weathers & Hopson, 2015). From a resilience perspective, such active behaviors constitute adaptive coping responses that buffer psychological harm (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). However, participants expressed skepticism regarding the effectiveness of platform-based reporting systems and the limited deterrence of existing legal measures, echoing critiques by Salter and Crofts (2015) and Dragiewicz et al. (2018).

Notably, peer support emerged as a critical protective factor. Participants who disclosed their experiences to friends or family described emotional relief and strengthened coping, whereas those without supportive networks reported isolation. These dynamics mirror prior findings that social connectedness enhances resilience to online aggression (Giumetti & Kowalski, 2024; Yanti et al., 2023).

Media Literacy, Awareness, and the Role of Digital Competence

The third theme underscores the centrality of digital media literacy as both a protective mechanism and a behavioral moderator. Participants who demonstrated higher critical awareness were less likely to internalize or reproduce violent content, consistent with evidence that media literacy interventions reduce cyberbullying perpetration and victimization (Rusdy & Fauzi, 2023; Melović et al., 2020). Conversely, low literacy and anonymity were linked to increased "digital courage" and online disinhibition, which may facilitate aggressive expression (Rice et. al., 2015). These findings reinforce SLT's emphasis on observational learning and the environmental reinforcement of norms—suggesting that digital spaces simultaneously teach and enable both aggression and empathy (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Within the risk-resilience framework, media literacy functions as a resilience enhancer by fostering self-regulation, ethical reflection, and critical consumption—skills vital for navigating high-risk online environments (Gill & Orgad, 2018).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

By integrating SLT with a risk-resilience framework, this study advances a more nuanced understanding of how youth both internalize and contest digital violence within contemporary media ecologies. SLT elucidates how aggressive, coercive, or controlling behaviors are learned and normalized through repeated exposure, peer reinforcement, and algorithmically amplified content. In parallel, the risk-resilience model explains why young people exposed to similar digital risks demonstrate divergent outcomes, depending on the availability of protective resources such as media literacy, socio-emotional competence, and social support.

From a practical perspective, the findings point to the need for multi-level, theoretically informed interventions. First, educational initiatives should move beyond information-based media literacy to include behavioral modeling and skills-based learning, enabling young people to observe, practice, and reinforce assertive boundary-setting, ethical online engagement, and help-seeking behaviors. Embedding peer-led components within these programs may further enhance their effectiveness by leveraging social modeling processes central to SLT.

Second, the findings underscore the critical role of platform accountability in shaping online norms. Social media companies function as powerful socializing agents; thus, transparent reporting mechanisms, consistent enforcement of community standards, and algorithmic designs that reduce the visibility of abusive content are essential for modeling prosocial behavior. Platform features should not only enable harm reduction (e.g., blocking tools) but also actively support

resilience-building by validating user reports and reducing secondary victimization.

Third, at the policy level, the study highlights the need for stronger legal and institutional frameworks that recognize technology-facilitated violence as a distinct and serious form of harm. Policies should ensure accessible reporting pathways, victim-centered legal responses, and integrated psychosocial support—particularly within educational institutions, where young people often first seek help. Without structural reinforcement, individual resilience strategies remain limited in their capacity to offset systemic vulnerabilities.

These implications position resilience not merely as an individual trait but as a socially supported and policy-enabled capacity embedded within the broader digital ecosystem. Combating youth digital violence therefore requires coordinated efforts among educators, families, policymakers, and technology companies. Strengthening media literacy, socio-emotional competencies, and supportive networks—while simultaneously reforming platform governance and legal protections—offers a sustainable pathway for reducing harm and fostering youth agency in digital spaces (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Powell & Henry, 2017).

Limitations and Future Research

While the study offers valuable insights into youth experiences of digital violence, several limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the sample's demographic homogeneity—predominantly university-educated young adults (aged 23-25) with high digital accessibility—limits the generalizability of results to broader youth populations, particularly adolescents, non-students, or individuals with limited technological access. The concentration of participants in urban and metropolitan areas (84%) may also have shaped the nature of reported experiences, as exposure to diverse digital cultures and stronger digital literacy may buffer or amplify certain forms of online aggression.

Second, the gender imbalance (68% female) likely influenced thematic emphasis, particularly in discussions of sexualized and gender-based online harms. While this aligns with the documented gendered dynamics of digital violence (Brown et al., 2022; Fiolet et al., 2021), it may underrepresent male or gender-diverse perspectives on online aggression and coping mechanisms. Third, participants' heavy reliance on visual and interactive platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube—which are algorithmically driven and socially performative—may have influenced both exposure to and interpretation of digital violence. This platform-specific context constrains transferability to other digital environments (e.g., gaming, anonymous forums) where aggression and surveillance may manifest differently.

Finally, as the data are derived from self-reported narratives, findings may reflect selective recall, social desirability, or emotional filtering, especially given the sensitivity of discussing digital victimization. Within the lens of SLT, this limitation highlights how participants' meaning-making is itself shaped by culturally learned scripts about victimhood, resilience, and accountability. Similarly, from a risk and resilience perspective, the sample's relatively high digital competence may overrepresent adaptive coping and underrepresent structural vulnerabilities present in lower-access or marginalized groups. Therefore, future research should thus employ comparative, mixed-method, and cross-platform designs to examine how structural, technological, and psychosocial variables intersect to shape digital violence and resilience among more diverse youth populations.

CONCLUSION

The findings highlight the dual nature of digital platforms: while they can inform and empower, they can also facilitate violence, especially when users lack critical digital literacy and ethical awareness. Thus, media literacy is not merely a cognitive skill, but a socio-ethical competence involving critical thinking, moral responsibility, and active citizenship. Educational interventions, early-age digital literacy programs, and improved content moderation policies are essential for reducing harm and fostering responsible media use. Together, these findings highlight the layered nature of violence in digital contexts and offer a framework for understanding how young people may either become vulnerable or empowered through their online engagements. Thus, media literacy must be understood not just as a skill, but as a cultural competency integrating critical thinking, ethical judgment, and social responsibility. Early digital education, content filtering systems, and platform-based ethical oversight are essential for meaningful prevention. Digital media serves as a double-edged sword in the context of youth violence. On one hand, it offers platforms for positive engagement and information dissemination; on the other, it exposes youth to violent content, potentially normalizing aggression and fostering desensitization.

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