ARTÍCULO DE INVESTIGACIÓN

Consideración de la influencia de la manipulación online en la intención suicida de los adolescentes

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Resumen

Los casos de presión psicológica a través de los medios de comunicación en línea están adquiriendo formas cada vez más peligrosas y específicas, por lo que es aconsejable considerarlos como problemas sociales independientes. Un resultado especialmente indicativo de tales transformaciones es la manipulación en línea de los adolescentes para llevarlos al suicidio. El artículo informa de un estudio empírico que consiste en el análisis de las características psicológicas y los factores del comportamiento suicida en la adolescencia mayor, la identificación de la característica psicológica del comportamiento de los adolescentes en los medios sociales mediante el diagnóstico de la adicción a Internet de los adolescentes, y la evaluación de la relación entre la propensión al comportamiento suicida y la adicción a Internet entre ellos. Los resultados del estudio permiten concluir que existe una relación entre la conducta suicida y la adicción a Internet que determina el efecto de la manipulación online en la intención suicida de los adolescentes. Desde este punto de vista, los casos de manipulación en línea que resultan en el suicidio de los adolescentes suponen una amenaza real para la salud física y mental de la joven generación. Los adolescentes se encuentran en el grupo de mayor riesgo porque su desarrollo mental se caracteriza por pronunciados indicadores de crisis. El trabajo presenta las direcciones que pueden tomar los padres y los profesores para informar a los adolescentes sobre los diversos aspectos del problema de la manipulación en línea y para prevenir sus efectos nocivos.

Palabras clave: Manipulación, Comportamiento suicida, Adicción a Internet, "Grupos de muerte", Imagen.

Abstract

Consideration of online manipulation influence on adolescent suicidal intent

Cases of psychological pressure by means of online media are acquiring increasingly dangerous and specific forms, which is why it is advisable to consider them as independent social problems. A particularly indicative result of such transformations is the online manipulation of adolescents to drive them to suicide. The article reports an empirical study consisting of the study of psychological features and factors of suicidal behavior in older adolescence, the identification of the psychological characteristic of adolescents' behavior on social media through the diagnosis of adolescent Internet addiction, and the assessment of the relationship between the propensity to suicidal behavior and Internet addiction among adolescents. The results of the study suggest a conclusion that there is a relationship between suicidal behavior and Internet addiction that determines the effect of online manipulation on the suicidal intent of adolescents.

In this light, the cases of online manipulation resulting in adolescent suicide pose a real threat to the physical and mental health of the young generation. Adolescents are in the group of increased risk because their mental development is characterized by pronounced indicators of crisis. The work presents the directions that can be taken by parents and teachers to inform adolescents about the various aspects of the problem of online manipulation and to prevent its harmful effects.

Key words: Manipulation, Suicidal behavior, Internet addiction, "Death groups", Image.

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1.- Introduction

Any achievement of scientific and technological progress has both positive and negative consequences. This thesis particularly accurately characterizes the situation with the Internet in recent decades: having greatly facilitated and enriched human life, the World Wide Web has become the source of several phenomena that threaten the well-being and even the lives of citizens.

Studies conducted in the last 2-3 years show that modern adolescents cannot imagine their life without the Internet because they live in the 21st century and their lifestyle directly depends on the latest technologies (Grishina & Volkova, 2018; Shimanivskaya & Sarychev, 2021; Yakymenko et al., 2021). Often adolescents use the Internet as a way of life, they prefer a virtual life that can replace reality, which can lead to tragic consequences for their lives.

An example of this can be the high-profile events associated with the so-called "death groups" – Internet communities that induce teenagers to commit suicide, the activities of which have allegedly caused several teenage suicides (Arkhipova et al., 2017). No less threatening of the Internet is cyberbullying, or Internet mobbing, a modern form of aggression intended to hurt or humiliate a person without physical violence (as opposed to bullying), which has become common with the advent of cell phones and the Internet and can even lead to the victim's suicide.

The development of an effective strategy to overcome the dangers of online manipulation in terms of suicide inducement is a topical issue and an important role in this regard belongs to preventive measures of psychological and pedagogical impact.

Literature review

Proceeding from the topic of the study, we identify a range of research on the phenomenon of suicide:

- psychological content of suicidality, motivation of suicidal behavior (De Beurs et al., 2019; O'Connor & Nock, 2014); biochemical, social, socio-psychological, pathopsychological, philosophical, and ideological factors of suicide (Chan et al., 2016), mental states and personal experiences that affect the development of suicidality (Franklin et al., 2017), as well as the main psychodiagnostic methods and directions of psychocorrection of suicidal behavior (Bruffaerts et al., 2011);

- features and psychological prevention of autoaggressive behavior of certain social groups, including children (Cox et al., 2016; Wasserman & Carli, 2021) and youth (Crepeau-Hobson & Estes, 2019; Michelmore & Hindley, 2012);

- effective approaches to the early psychological diagnosis of suicidal behavior among students and its prevention (Kelly et al., 2002; Verona & Shabnam, 2011).

Summarizing various views on the problem, we conclude that suicidal behavior is understood as autoaggressive actions of a person that are consciously and deliberately aimed at taking their own life. This phenomenon is not usually associated with serious mental disorders (Wu et al., 2010). Among the reasons inducing a suicide (economic, social, psychological, etc.), a separate place belongs to criminal actions (driving to suicide) (Shimshock et al., 2011). However, this factor is considered in conjunction with psychological aspects (decrease in stress resistance, problems in the communicative sphere, ineffective psychological defense mechanisms, loss of the value of life, etc.) (Bridge et al., 2006). The point is that the act of suicide is almost always a consequence of a combination of psychophysiological, moral, psychological, social, ecological, and sociocultural factors (Harrington, 2001).

The problem of suicide and suicidal behavior in older adolescence deserves special attention both in the scientific and practical sense. Results of research (Cross et al., 2006; Kok & Goh, 2011) show that the senior adolescent age is characterized by the acutely experienced psychological crisis associated with the formation of ego-identity (Kok & Goh, 2011), the process of personal self-determination, and claiming of the autonomy of the young person at the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels (Cross et al., 2006). This triggers the emergence of the risk of suicidal behavior, which can be viewed as a result of the interaction of many factors: psychological (the experience of identity crisis, character accentuation, and individual psychological features), interpersonal (psychological climate in the family, tension and conflict in relations with significant others and peers) and social (graduation from school, professional self-determination) (Shain, 2016).

Considering another aspect of the theme of our article, it is worth noting that in connection with the development of Internet technologies and the corresponding increased popularity of social media (monthly in Russia 65.9 million people access the Internet, of which over 90% visit social media, with approximately 30 million new messages daily on social media (Mail.Ru Group, n.d.)), over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in the relevance of research on various aspects of a person's

existence in the virtual space (Do et al., 2013; Meerkerk et al., 2009), including the phenomenon of Internet addiction (Cash et al., 2012; Sharma & De Sousa, 2016). There has also been a rise in scientific research concerning the Internet related to adolescence (Bányai et al., 2017; Barry et al., 2017).

Thus, we believe that the various aspects of suicide and online activities of adolescents, as well as the related phenomenon of Internet addiction, are described in sufficient detail in scientific articles (over the past 10 years) published in cited journals (Bányai et al., 2017; Barry et al., 2017; Cash et al., 2012; Sharma & De Sousa, 2016). However, in our view, scientific studies summarizing the examined problem from the point of various approaches including those focused on reducing the involvement of adolescents in destructive social online communities are not represented to the same degree. It appears to us that this is due to the problem in consideration being understudied and new, which supports the relevance of the chosen research topic.

Considering the above, we formulate the purpose of the article as determining the relationship between the manifestations of suicidal behavior and Internet addiction that determines the impact of online manipulation on the suicidal intent of adolescents.

The stated goal determines the following research objectives:

1) to identify the psychological features and factors of the emergence of suicidal behavior in older adolescence (based on the results of psychodiagnostic assessment);

2) to conduct an experimental study of adolescent Internet addiction;

3) to define the phenomenon of adolescent suicide caused by online manipulation from the point of age and social psychology.

The proposed research hypothesis is that there is a relationship between suicidal behavior and Internet addiction, which determines the impact of online manipulation on suicidal intent in adolescents.

2. Methods and procedure

Study design

A qualitative and quantitative study of the influence of online manipulation on the suicidal intent of adolescents is conducted in the period from September to November of 2021 based on two educational institutions of secondary general-education schools (Moscow, Russia).

The first stage of the study involves the analysis of literary sources and articles on related topics.

The second stage presents an experimental study of the psychological characteristics and factors of the emergence of suicidal behavior in older adolescence, as well as and adolescent Internet addiction.

The sample of the study is composed of 88 88 boys and girls between the ages of 16 and 18 (including 48 girls and 40 boys), which are divided in the study into three subgroups.

Methods

The empirical study employs a battery of psychological tests divided into two groups.

The first group of tests addresses the features and factors of the manifestation of suicidal behavior in late adolescence: C. Spielberger's State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) adapted by Y. Khanin (Posokhova & Soloveva, 2008); Beck's Depression Inventory (BDI) (Tarabrina, 2001), Projective technique "Non-existent animal" (Venger, 2003); C. Rogers and R. Diamond's social and psychological adjustment questionnaire (Dmitriev et al., 2010).

The second group consists of tests characterizing older adolescents' propensity to Internet addiction: Kimberly Young's Internet Addiction Test (IAT) (Young, 2018); the Internet Addiction Scale of A. Zhichkina's Internet Behavior Questionnaire (Cyberpsy, 2020).

Study procedure

At the first stage of the empirical study, all study participants are subjected to general test diagnostics of the levels of social and psychological adaptation, depression, self-esteem, and anxiety.

At the second stage, cluster analysis is conducted to identify subjects with the risk of suicide. By the method of cluster analysis with the use of software package SPSS 11.5 for Windows, all respondents are divided into three groups: 1) respondents not inclined to suicidal behavior; 2) respondents inclined to suicidal behavior; 3) respondents showing the traits of suicidal individuals. Next, a qualitative analysis of the psychological features of the three groups of respondents is performed.

At the third stage of the study, a test diagnostics of Internet addiction is administered in all three groups.

At the fourth stage, to identify the relationship between suicide risk and Internet addiction, mathematical processing of the results of the study is conducted to calculate the Spearman rank correlation coefficient.

3. Results

The study results allow stating that overall, in the whole sample (88 respondents), the average level of state and trait anxiety prevails, although it should be noted that there is a trend to higher levels of anxiety (both state and trait) with anxiety as a trait observed in 40% of the subjects, generally indicating the manifestations of emotional instability in the young people.

The processing of the results of BDI reveals that 15% of the examinees show no signs of depression at all, 33% have mild depression, an average degree of depression

is diagnosed in 33% of the adolescents, and 16% of the students have a high level of depression, of which 12% show particularly high, threatening level of depression. These 12% deserve special attention.

The results of the projective method "Non-existent animal" give polar information. Both positive and negative trends are observed, although the negative are more prominent: high aggression is found in 69% of the students; high anxiety – in 66%; propensity to verbal forms of aggression as an inadequate method of self-defense – 69%; infantilism, emotional immaturity, superficiality in decision-making – 61%; inadequate self-esteem: excessive unrealized ambition as a manifestation of inflated self-esteem – 30%, the lack of self-affirmation tendencies amid low self-esteem – 55%; only 15% of the respondents show adequate self-esteem; low potency, fear of active actions, passivity in situations involving difficulties – 48%; dissatisfaction with oneself, one's actions, the level of comprehension, and one's position in society – 36%; orientation of the existing forms and mechanisms of self-defense toward seniors, toward those who possess the authorized direct or indirect means of influence, able to use coercion – 72%; 59% of the respondents demonstrate readiness to defend themselves at any moment and from any direction.

Regarding the observed positive characteristics, goal orientedness, realism, effectiveness, purposefulness in achieving the goal is found in 27%; 21% are capable of adequate perception and processing of important information in decision-making, rely on the objective side of the situation; 36% show vitality and creativity as a personality characteristic. Nevertheless, the necessary prerequisites for successful adaptability are found only in 12% of the respondents.

At the second stage, three main groups of respondents are identified by means of cluster analysis: 1) the respondents not inclined to suicidal behavior (66 respondents); 2) the respondents inclined to suicidal behavior (18 respondents); 3) the respondents showing the traits of suicidal persons (2 respondents).

Following this, we conduct a qualitative analysis of the psychological features of the subjects in the three groups.

The subjects of the third group possess the expressed qualities inherent in a suicidal personality, i.e. emotional instability, impulsiveness, morbid self-love, and frustration. Indicators of the level of social-psychological adaptation suggest that these subjects are isolated from the people around them, and this is most likely a conscious choice (non-acceptance of others).

In further analysis, we compare the first and second groups of respondents Table 1 presents the mean values of indicators from various methods in the two groups of subjects.

Table 1

Indicators of the expression of psychological factors of suicidal behavior in the groups of respondents

Indicators	Mean values of indicator expression	
	group 1	group 2
Adaptability – Inadaptability	70.5	44.8
Self-acceptance – Lack of self-acceptance	82.3	59.6
Acceptance of others – non-acceptance of others	65.3	23.8
Emotional comfort – Emotional discomfort	67.3	33.6
Internal control – External control	71.7	47.2
Dominance – Conformity	59.4	46.3
Problem-solving – Problem avoidance	11.1	15.9
State anxiety	39.6	49.5
Trait anxiety	37.3	48.4

Representatives of the first group are characterized by high levels of social and psychological adaptation, acceptance of self and others, high emotional comfort, acceptance of responsibility for the events taking place, medium-high and high self-esteem, and a moderate level of trait and state anxiety. These students show persistence in pursuing their goals but can compromise if the situation so requires and are characterized by a high ability to develop auxiliary ways of solving problems and the ability to relieve tension in a situation of unmet need.

Based on the results of the study of the individual characteristics of the subjects in the first and second groups, we assume that the subjects in the first group are characterized by a lack of propensity for suicidal risk behavior, while the subjects in the second group are prone to the manifestation of suicidal behavior.

Next, a test diagnosis of Internet addiction is administered out in all three groups.

The results of IAT reveal the low level of Internet addiction in 21% of the respondents, average level – in 43%, and high level – in 36% of the students.

The results obtained using the Internet Addiction Scale of A.E. Zhichkina's Internet Behavior Questionnaire suggest that 23% of the respondents show no signs of Internet addiction, 43% are prone to Internet addiction, and 34% show the signs of Internet addiction.

Further on, to determine the relationship between proneness to suicidal behavior and Internet addiction, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient is calculated for two groups of students. The outcome of the analysis is as follows.

In the first respondent group (not inclined to suicidal behavior), no direct connection is found between the indices of trait and state anxiety, the degree of depression, as well as the indices on the scales of the questionnaire of social and psychological adaptation, on the one hand, and Internet addiction, on the other hand.

In contrast, in the second respondent group (inclined to suicidal behavior), a direct relationship is found between Internet addiction and trait ($r_{emp} = 0.717$, p<0.01) and state ($r_{emp} = 0.652$, p<0.01) anxiety, the level of depression ($r_{emp} = 0.569$, p<0,01), and indicators on the scales of "Adaptability – Disadaptability" ($r_{emp} = 0.581$, p<0.01), "Acceptance of others – Non-acceptance of others" ($r_{emp} = 0.728$, p<0.01), and "Internal control – External control" ($r_{emp} = 0.607$, p<0.01).

Thus, the obtained correlations confirm the existence of a relationship that determines the possibility of the influence of online manipulation on suicidal intent in adolescents.

4. Discussion

The results of our study demonstrate that proneness to suicidal behavior is associated with certain personality characteristics. Meanwhile, researchers argue (Kelly et al., 2002) that one of the key determinants shaping the specificity of adolescent age is the social situation of development, the central aspect of which is interaction with peers and, accordingly, the formation of informal groups, including on the Internet. That being said, not all Internet communities are socially useful and focus on discussing interests or personal issues. Different subcultures quite often produce a philosophy of life that can encourage a young person to engage in rash behavior sometimes harmful to physical and mental health (Barry et al., 2017).

Regarding the motives behind adolescents' involvement in "death groups", researchers make some assumptions (Bányai et al., 2017). In particular, they note the influence of the crisis manifestations of mental life (internal conflict, low self-esteem, a pronounced feeling of loneliness, etc.) associated with the objective crisis of adolescence. The situation is further aggravated by the fact that an adolescent can often be informed of the dangers of entering destructive virtual communities but not fully understand it or view the situation as a kind of game (Sharma & De Sousa, 2016). In this context, it should be noted that intensive exposure to the Internet significantly affects the perception of the real world. Thus, in an adolescent's mental model of the world, they perceive themselves as a game character fully protected from various threats by the possibility of using the "save-load" functions. Researchers (Meerkerk et al., 2009) emphasize this refers not to a persistent conscious perception of reality as a game environment, which is also possible but is then indicative of mental deformations, but to unconscious reactions, a kind of psychological defense mechanism, which provides stability to an adolescent's personality.

Here it needs to be pointed out that the problem of adolescent suicide has regrettably been relevant since before the advent and mass spread of social media. However, given the exceptional outstanding public resonance and media publicity, suicidal intent tends to be almost automatically associated with the influence of online communities. Such an approach only hinders the search for the real causes of suicidal behavior of an adolescent and interferes with proper psychological help. We should also note that we are convinced that the very active coverage of this problem in the media can only stimulate adolescents' interest in such groups given their aforementioned playful worldview and pronounced negativism.

The effectiveness of solving this complex social problem, in our opinion, requires coordinated interaction between the school (primarily psychologists and class teachers) and parents to provide adolescents with detailed information about the various aspects of the problem of online manipulation and to prevent its harmful effects. Typically, the interaction between the school and the family in this matter presupposes a strict prohibition of a direct discussion of such communities with children (Wasserman & Carli, 2021). This approach is certainly not without reason, as excessive focus on social limitations can only interest an adolescent, causing an opposite reaction. On the other hand, it must be recognized that believing that children are completely unaware of such communities amid today's freedom of information is, at best, naive. Thus, there emerges the problem, the resolution of which, we believe, lies in the effectiveness of communication within the family and parents' understanding of their children. There are no ready-made recommendations on such matters, as there is a need to consider the individual features of an adolescent, their predominant emotional tendencies (aggression, anxiety, calmness, etc.), the current mood of the personality, the general atmosphere in the family, cognitive development (especially concerning the understanding of social problems), and the specifics of crisis manifestations. The listed reference points should serve as a basis for both the parents' general upbringing strategy and the conversation on the dangers of social media.

The enlightenment of school psychologists and teachers on this issue should be carried out not only in terms of informing about the content of destructive communities and the features of suicide markers but also through an explanation of the basic age specifics of adolescents and the rules of communication with them. Moreover, having at their disposal the data of psychodiagnostic assessments, a qualified specialist can point out to parents the problematic issues of their child, which are sometimes difficult to notice even for the closest people. In this, teachers need to refrain from making sweeping, categorical judgments concerning the suicide risk of a particular adolescent: it is necessary to present the facts of their mental life, but not to draw definitive conclusions. Even the identification of a set of psychological features indicating a person's propensity to suicidal behavior does not give grounds to assert that we are looking at a potential suicide attempter.

We believe that a vital strategic aspect in resolving the identified problem has to be clear prioritization: fighting not against social media but for adolescents' mental and physical health. Accordingly, the corrective and upbringing work of teachers and the

upbringing influence of parents should be aimed not at the formation of a stable negative attitude to Internet content, which can only provoke resistance in response, but at the harmonious development of various aspects of self-awareness and the formation of the motivational and value system the core of which is respect and love for life – one's own and others'.

5. Conclusion

The results of the study confirm the hypothesized relationship between suicidal behavior and Internet addiction determining the influence of online manipulation on suicidal intent in adolescents.

Overall, the results of our research can be summarized in the following statements. Cases of online manipulation resulting in adolescent suicides pose a real threat to the physical and mental health of the young generation. Adolescents are in the group of higher risk because their mental development is characterized by pronounced indicators of crisis – drastic biological transformations and emotional instability typically manifesting in the form of increased anxiety or aggression (sometimes autoaggression), negativism and stubbornness, proneness to conflict. The listed phenomena describe the general instability of this life period and can push a person to commit suicide. Among the inducements that stimulate teenagers to join "death groups," in addition to feelings of loneliness, lack of understanding from others, and other manifestations of mental instability, we can single out a gamified perception of the world, which implies incomplete awareness of the danger of participation in such games.

Given the above, a prospect for further studies can be the analysis of opportunities to resolve the outlined problem and the development of specific recommendations for parents and teachers on the formation of a positive and careful attitude to life in adolescents based on sincere, trusting relationships.

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