

Analysis of the Psychological Motivation and Communication Characteristics of “Cyber Violence” in the Social Media Environment

Yuhan Zhao*

Communication University of China, Beijing 100024, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

Copyright: © 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: The widespread adoption of social media has fundamentally transformed information dissemination, with cyberspace emerging as a pivotal platform for public opinion expression and interactive communication. Concurrently, cyberbullying has proliferated, posing multifaceted threats to individuals’ physical and mental well-being, digital ecosystems, and social order. This study examines the social media environment through the lens of social psychology and communication theories, systematically analyzing the individual, group, and societal psychological drivers behind cyberbullying. The study delineates its distinctive characteristics in terms of communicators, transmission pathways, and content patterns, ultimately proposing targeted guidance and regulatory measures.

Keywords: Social media; Cyberbullying; Psychological motivation; Communication characteristics; Online ecosystem

Online publication: March 18, 2026

1. Introduction

Social media, characterized by lightweight, real-time, and interactive features, has transcended the temporal and spatial constraints of traditional communication. This has granted the public unprecedented rights to express themselves and participate, driving cyberspace toward diversification. However, this open landscape has also given rise to cyberbullying, which manifests in various forms—from verbal abuse and malicious defamation to privacy breaches and group attacks. Such violence not only erodes the online ecosystem and inflicts severe psychological trauma on victims but also fuels online conflicts, undermining social harmony and stability. Given its covert and pervasive nature, combating cyberbullying has become increasingly challenging. A thorough exploration of its psychological drivers and dissemination patterns is therefore essential to addressing these governance challenges.

2. The social media environment and the core definition of cyberbullying

2.1. The connotation and manifestation of cyber violence

Cyberbullying refers to the collective term for acts of humiliation, attacks, and defamation committed by individuals in cyberspace through texts, images, or audio messages. Its core characteristics include violating public order and good morals, infringing on others' legitimate rights, and possessing the characteristic of rapid dissemination. Perpetrators employ hacking techniques to expose personal privacy, tracking victims from online to offline spaces. Through invisible public pressure, they coerce victims into psychological and physical compliance, thereby undermining their freedom of will and autonomy in decision-making^[1]. In social media contexts, cyberbullying manifests in diverse forms: overt verbal attacks like malicious insults, sarcasm, and physical assaults, as well as covert violence such as malicious photo editing, privacy breaches, social isolation, and rumor-mongering. Unlike traditional violence requiring physical contact, cyberbullying leverages its pervasive reach to create collective pressure, continuously damaging victims' reputations and mental health. Its impact spans broader spheres and proves more challenging to mitigate, with harmful effects growing increasingly complex and widespread in digital environments.

2.2. The unique attributes of the social media environment

Social media possesses unique characteristics that create fertile ground for the emergence and spread of cyberbullying, with three core attributes. The anonymity and virtuality enable users to interact through virtual identities, weakening moral constraints and responsibility awareness in real society. This lowers the psychological threshold for violent behavior. Interactive and viral dissemination allow information to spread rapidly through likes, comments, and shares, creating a "one voice, many followers" effect that enables violent rhetoric to reach a broad audience in a short time. Under algorithmic recommendation mechanisms, platforms push similar content based on user preferences, easily forming closed information cocoons that reinforce extreme views. This provides environmental support for escalating cyberbullying, further exacerbating its adverse impacts.

2.3. The correlation between social media and cyberbullying

While social media isn't the direct cause of cyberbullying, its dissemination mechanisms and functional design are closely linked to its occurrence. By lowering the barriers to information sharing, social media allows anyone to quickly voice opinions. The absence of professional moderation mechanisms enables violent rhetoric to bypass oversight, while its group dynamics often fuel emotional polarization. As opposing viewpoints escalate into heated debates, even neutral users become drawn into the conflict, potentially escalating into targeted violence. Platforms' traffic-first operational logic may inadvertently allow controversial content to spread unchecked, exacerbating the cycle of "emotional outbursts → traffic growth → violence escalation" that persists, continuously shaping the online environment.

3. Psychological motivation of cyberbullying in social media environments

3.1. Psychological driving factors at the individual level

Individual psychological states, as key internal drivers of cyberbullying, primarily manifest through emotional venting, lack of self-identity, and the fulfillment of control desires. In a fast-paced society, individuals endure life pressures and work-related anxieties, urgently seeking outlets for negative emotions. The virtual nature of social media makes it a safe channel for emotional release. Some users transform negative emotions into violent

statements, deriving psychological comfort through attacking others. Those with insufficient self-identity may resort to cyberbullying to align with popular views and attack dissenters, gaining a false sense of belonging and value through group affiliation. Individuals lacking real-world influence can leverage cyberbullying to exert influence on others, satisfying latent control desires and compensating for real-life powerlessness. In the virtual world, they seek a unique psychological equilibrium, as if gaining partial control over situations to alleviate inner unease and helplessness.

3.2. Psychological transmission mechanisms at the group level

The transmission and diffusion of group psychology serve as pivotal factors in transforming cyberbullying from individual acts into collective incidents. Under the de-individualization effect, when individuals integrate into groups, their self-awareness is replaced by collective consciousness, leading to weakened moral constraints and responsibility awareness. Embracing the notion that “the law does not punish the multitude”, they boldly engage in violent behavior. In the group atmosphere created by social media, herd mentality compels some neutral users to voice aggressive comments under the pressure of the majority’s violent rhetoric, avoiding isolation by following the trend. This expands the scope of violent behavior. Within group polarization phenomena, internal opinion exchanges continuously reinforce existing perceptions, with extreme viewpoints gradually becoming dominant. The intensity of cyberbullying escalates persistently, shifting from verbal attacks to more harmful actions. The role of such group psychology in the digital environment continuously drives cyberbullying to evolve from individual acts into broader, more severe collective incidents.

3.3. Psychological environmental influences at the social level

The social psychological environment provides external support for cyberbullying, primarily driven by the spread of social anxiety and value conflicts ^[2]. During this period of social transformation, the inherent differences in interests and values among various groups are further amplified on social media, sparking controversies and inciting targeted violent behaviors. The pervasive anxiety in society makes individuals more susceptible to negative information, leading to prejudice against specific groups or events. People often vent their frustrations through cyberbullying, while traditional moral norms lose influence in cyberspace. Some harmful social trends infiltrate this space, reducing public awareness of cyberbullying and enabling more rampant violent acts. Moreover, the public’s lack of discernment in complex online environments, coupled with herd mentality, further fuels the spread of cyberbullying, allowing it to proliferate unchecked in the virtual world and undermine social harmony and stability.

4. Characteristics of online violence dissemination in social media environments

4.1. Communication subject: Anonymous and diversification coexist

In the social media landscape, cyberbullying perpetrators exhibit dual characteristics of anonymity and diversity. The anonymity serves as the core feature, allowing users to conceal their true identities through virtual accounts and nicknames, thereby avoiding real-world consequences for violent acts. This enables various groups—from ordinary netizens to online influencers—to potentially become perpetrators of cyberbullying, initiating or participating in such behavior under anonymous identities. The perpetrators also demonstrate diversity, unrestricted by age, occupation, or geographic location. Users from different groups may rapidly assemble around shared viewpoints, forming temporary violent groups. Additionally, some perpetrators adopt a “role-playing” mentality, deliberately disguising

their identities to post violent statements. This complexity not only makes it harder to trace the perpetrators but also complicates the situation of cyberbullying dissemination, rendering it increasingly difficult to clarify.

4.2. Transmission path: Fission diffusion and circle penetration

Cyber violence has transformed traditional linear dissemination patterns, exhibiting viral propagation and hierarchical infiltration. Social media interactions—likes, comments, and shares—accelerate viral spread, allowing violent content to rapidly propagate from individual users to their social circles. Through secondary dissemination within these circles, the information expands exponentially, reaching massive audiences in short periods^[3]. In this hierarchical infiltration, algorithmic recommendations combined with user preferences precisely deliver violent content to like-minded circles, reinforcing violent consensus within these groups. Cross-circle dissemination is also common, with violent messages leveraging trending topics and hot search lists to break through circle boundaries, triggering violent incidents across the entire internet. These incidents spread rapidly from localized areas to the entire online space, with their impact continuously escalating and intensifying across different social circles.

4.3. Communication content: Fragmentation and aggression enhancement

Cyberbullying content exhibits a fragmented and increasingly aggressive trend. Driven by social media's lightweight information dissemination, violent content often appears in fragmented forms without a complete logical framework. Short texts, memes, and short videos alone can convey aggressive intent, facilitating rapid spread and acceptance. The content's aggressiveness continues to escalate, evolving from initial verbal abuse to rumor-mongering, defamation, privacy breaches, and malicious mockery. These attacks are highly targeted, focusing on personal aspects like identity, appearance, and behavior, inflicting comprehensive harm on victims. Moreover, violent content possesses strong emotional manipulation capabilities, amplifying negative emotions and creating confrontational atmospheres to attract more users. This compels violent acts to escalate, exacerbating the detrimental impact of cyberbullying and expanding its reach.

5. Guidance and regulation of cyberbullying in the social media environment

5.1. Individual and platform level coping strategies

As the first line of defense against cyberbullying, individuals and platforms must collaborate to build a coordinated response system. Individuals should enhance media literacy education to improve their ability to discern online information and think rationally, while establishing proper online values to consciously resist violent rhetoric and refrain from participating in cyberbullying. They should also develop emotional management skills, venting negative emotions through appropriate channels rather than attacking others to relieve stress. Platforms need to optimize algorithmic recommendation mechanisms to reduce the spread of violent content, improve content moderation systems to quickly identify and remove violent information through technology, and refine user reporting mechanisms to provide convenient avenues for victims to seek redress. Through these collective efforts, people can build a solid barrier against cyberbullying.

5.2. Social and institutional safeguards

The core of establishing a long-term governance mechanism lies in social and institutional safeguards. At the societal level, efforts should focus on fostering a rational and friendly online environment through initiatives like public awareness campaigns and case studies that highlight the harms of cyberbullying. These measures aim

to cultivate healthy online interactions, leverage the guiding role of social organizations and media, and promptly counter cyberbullying to spread positive energy. This helps alleviate social anxiety and reduce violence stemming from value conflicts. On the institutional front, it is crucial to refine relevant laws and regulations, clearly define cyberbullying behaviors and legal liabilities, and strengthen penalties for perpetrators to address accountability challenges, thereby solidifying institutional foundations for combating cyberbullying ^[4]. Additionally, innovative governance approaches should be explored, with adaptive adjustments to safeguard measures in response to evolving online environments. This ensures the long-term governance mechanism remains robust and effective, better addressing the complex issue of cyberbullying while maintaining a healthy digital ecosystem and social order.

6. Epilogue

Cyberbullying in social media environments emerges from the interplay of individual psychology, group dynamics, and societal contexts. Its transmission patterns are deeply intertwined with the inherent characteristics of social media platforms, making its governance both complex and requiring sustained efforts. Through analyzing the psychological triggers and dissemination patterns of cyberbullying, the study has identified multi-dimensional governance approaches involving individuals, platforms, society, and institutional frameworks. Combating cyberbullying does not negate the communicative value of social media, but rather requires scientific guidance, effective regulation, and balanced coordination between public expression rights and online order. Establishing a collaborative governance system that strengthens individual self-discipline, clarifies platform responsibilities, promotes positive societal guidance, and ensures robust institutional safeguards is essential to fundamentally curb the spread of cyberbullying. This will help purify cyberspace, transforming social media into a vital platform for spreading positive energy and fostering rational dialogue, thereby contributing to social harmony. Only when all stakeholders fulfill their roles in governance and collectively cultivate a healthy online ecosystem can social media truly serve all aspects of society.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Zheng HM, 2025, Cyberbullying in the Social Media Environment: An Empirical Study on Legal Regulation of Short Video Platforms. *Legal System Review*, 2025(2): 54–56.
- [2] Xu J, Zeng MK, Wang XY, 2025, Research on Governance Approaches of Cyberbullying in the Social Media Era. *News Tide*, 2025(1): 28–31.
- [3] Kuang Y, 2025, Construction and Empirical Study of Evaluation Indicators for the Prevention and Control of Cyberbullying on Social Media Platforms. *Journal of Information Science*, 44(1): 172–179 + 207.
- [4] Hu CC, Huang YL, 2024, Beyond Gatekeepers: A Comparative Study on the Governance of Cyberbullying on Social Media Platforms. *Journal of Soochow University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 45(4): 172–180.

Publisher's note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.